TALL, Dark and Deadly

BY

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I

It never pays to resist arrest.

Some policemen carry night sticks and all policemen carry .38-caliber Smith & Wesson revolvers. They are physically fit and trained to handle recalcitrant prisoners. You just can't win against odds like that.

Still, when Detective Sergeant Wienick put the collar on me in front of my apartment that Wednesday evening I balked and demanded, "What's the charge, sergeant?"

Knowing my aversion to being touched he merely said, "Sorry, counselor. You'll find out at the station house."

I started to file a demurrer, which was immediately overruled by Wienick's sidekick, a muscular young halfback, who closed his fingers over my arm.

I looked down at the fingers and said quietly, "Sergeant, would you kindly instruct your zealous colleague here to keep his paws to himself."

The cop tightened his grip. "Look, mister, I've heard all about you, a wise-aleck lawyer who—"

"Let him go," Wienick said. "The lieutenant wouldn't like it if you marked him up."

I got my arm back, bruised but intact. They had a squad car parked at the curb. I sat in the rear, with Wienick at my side, while the truculent cop handled the wheel. Speed, ap-

parently, was essential. His performance through Manhattan traffic, aided by an occasional blast of the siren to clear the path, was flashy but impressive.

"He's too reckless," I told Wienick. "He'll get a ticket."

The sergeant was not amused and I got no response.

I added plaintively, "Why all the secrecy, sergeant? Loosen up a little. What goes here?"

He kept his eyes straight ahead. "Knock it off, counselor."

I gave him an offended look. "That's no way to talk. Don't you read the papers? Only last week the mayor instructed all policemen to be courteous and polite."

No comment. I should have known from past experience that no lever or irritant would get results. Sergeant Wienick had his instructions and nothing could jostle him loose. He sat next to me, a bulky and silent sphinx in a ready-made suit.

When we pulled up at the Tenth Precinct on West 20th Street I knew who wanted to see me.

In this unlovely structure, Detective Lieutenant John Nola was quartered. I had an odd foreboding as I debarked and climbed the stairs ahead of Wienick. The layout here was familiar and I needed no directions. I went past the desk sergeant and up a flight of stairs. The door to his office was open and Nola sat behind his desk. He looked up, grave and unsmiling.

Strange behavior for the lieutenant. I had known him a good many years and he was usually pleased to see me. No handshake this time, however. No greeting at all. Just a sharp flick of the deepset eyes and he addressed the sergeant. "What took you so long?"

"Checked all his usual haunts, lieutenant. Couldn't locate him anywhere, so we staked out at his apartment. He came home a few minutes ago and we picked him up."

"All right. Get a stenographer in here. I want everything down on paper." He gave me a brusque nod. "Sit down, counselor."

For a moment we were alone. I searched his face, but it gave me no clue. John Nola was a neat, sober man, precise in manner, a career cop who danced at the end of nobody's string. His wife had died two years after their marriage and he had no family. He was dedicated to his job, working at it twenty-four hours a day. He was judicious and scrupulously fair. I had seen him work just as hard to prove a man innocent as he would to prove him guilty.

"For the love of Mike, lieutenant," I said, "would you kindly enlighten me? What is this all about? What gives? Why am I—"

The door opened and we had company. A police stenographer perched himself on a hard chair, pencil poised over his notebook, ready for hieroglyphics. Wienick rested his hip against the window sill, regarding me with a jaundiced eye.

"Where were you at three o'clock this afternoon?" Nola asked.

"Sorry, lieutenant." I shook my head, polite but firm. "I can't answer that until I know why I'm here. First, a couple of Cossacks on the city payroll haul me in. Then you start firing questions before apprising me of the charge. What happened? Have you torn up the rule book?"

"There is no charge. Yet."

That was a comfortable thought. "And with what crime am I not being charged? Yet?"

"What office is this?"

"Homicide West."

"What kind of cases do we handle?"

"Murder."

"That's it."

I looked at him and saw he was serious. "Whose?"

"A man named Steve Banton."

"*What?*" Now I was gaping foolishly.

"Killed at the precise time you were there in his hotel room."

I shook my head. Only a few hours ago I had seen Banton. I had spoken to him. The fact of death was too final, too irrevocable, for immediate acceptance. I tried to speak, but there was an obstruction in my throat. I cleared it out and said, "How did it happen?"

"Thirty-two-caliber bullet. Fired at point-blank range. Would you care to make a statement?"

"About what? For Pete's sake, lieutenant, you don't think that I—"

He cut me short. "Do you deny you were there?"

"Yes and no."

"That's an equivocal answer. What does it mean?"

"It means I was there, but not when he was shot."

"What was your purpose in visiting him?"

I sat still, choosing my words carefully. "Apparently I'm under suspicion. Why, I don't know. But if I had a client, under circumstances similar to these, I would say to him, 'You're in a spot. Button up. Let them play out their lines and see what they've hooked.' That would be sound advice. Anything less would be a dereliction of my duty as a lawyer. I certainly owe myself the same degree of vigilance I would give a stranger."

For a moment Nola was cold-eyed and unmoving. Then he turned to Wienick. "All right, sergeant. He wants proof. Let's give it to him. Get the desk clerk in here."

Wienick went out and came back, ushering in a slender man with blond hair and a blond mustache. He paused just

inside the door, fumbling nervously with his hat, licking his lips.

Nola said, "Where do you work, Mr. Corliss?"

"At the Wickford Arms." His Adam's apple bobbed. "I'm the desk clerk."

"Take a good look at this man. Have you ever seen him before?"

"Yes, sir. This afternoon in the lobby of the hotel."

"Do you remember the time?"

"Two forty-five, sir, exactly."

"What makes you so positive?"

"He gave me an envelope addressed to Mr. Banton. We always stamp the time on all incoming messages. I put the envelope in Mr. Banton's box and when I turned around he was walking to the elevators."

"Is this the envelope?" Nola held it up.

"Yes, sir."

"That will be all, Corliss. You can leave now."

When the door closed, Nola tapped the envelope. "Here it is, Jordan. Steve Banton's name written in your handwriting. Do you deny it?"

I said nothing.

"No comment at all, counselor?"

"There's a time for speech and a time for listening."

"Then listen good. That was number one. Bring in number two, Wienick."

This time the sergeant produced a small woman. She bustled in, saw me, stopped short and reversed her gears, colliding with the solid bulk of Wienick. No woman has ever swooned at the sight of me, but a few have remarked on a slight resemblance to Gregory Peck. If such a resemblance existed, this woman was impervious. Her face lost color and her eyes protruded as if I had suddenly sprouted a pair of

horns. She stood rooted, with a tremulous hand clasped tightly to her breast.

Nola's tone was calm and reassuring. "Now, Mrs. Worden, you're quite safe here. This is a police station. We have him under control. From your reaction I take it you recognize this man."

"Oh, yes!" Her voice was squeak-edged and breathless. "That's him—the man I saw—the one who was fighting with Mr. Banton. He—"

"If you please, Mrs. Worden. Take it slow and start from the beginning."

She drew a quivering breath and the words came.

"I was out shopping this afternoon, looking for gloves to match my new coat, but I was expecting a telephone call at three o'clock, so I had to be home, and just as I got out of the elevator I heard all this commotion down the hall. A man was trying to force his way into Room 705."

She paused for another breath and aimed a finger in my direction.

"Him. He had his shoulder against the door and his face was very grim and mean and nasty. I just can't stand violence, lieutenant. It frightens me. I never watch those dreadful crime stories on television. They give me nightmares and the next morning I'm completely—"

Nola said, "I understand, Mrs. Worden. About what you saw . . ."

She was slightly offended. "Oh, all right. I hurried past him to my own apartment. After all, it was none of my business, but I did look back and I saw that the door was open and he was going into Mr. Banton's room."

"What time was this?"

"Two forty-five. I remember looking at the clock to make

sure I wasn't late." She gave me a quick glance and shuddered. "May I go home now, lieutenant?"

"Yes. Thank you very much, Mrs. Worden. We'll call you if we need you. All right, Wienick, number three."

He shuffled some papers on his desk until the door opened again. Number three was another female. This one I did not recognize at all. She had more poise and self-confidence than her predecessors. It had probably been born into her, together with an immoderate appetite. The appetite added to her horizontal dimensions and gave her the build of a Wagnerian soprano. Never having seen a murderer before, she marched right up close, almost within touching distance, and stood there, inspecting me like something under glass.

"This the man?" she demanded.

"Yes, Miss Price."

"Humph! He doesn't look so dangerous."

"Looks are deceiving. Tell him where you work."

"At the Wickford Arms."

"In what capacity?"

"Switchboard operator."

"Were you on duty at three o'clock this afternoon?"

"Yes, I was."

"Did you get a call from Room 705?"

"I did."

"Tell us about it."

She was relishing her moment in the spotlight. "The board is never busy in the afternoon, so when the flash came I plugged right in. I asked for Banton's order, but he didn't answer. Instead I heard a strange sound, like someone choking, fighting to catch his breath. I said, 'Hello—hello—what's wrong up there?' Mr. Banton was groaning. He seemed in great pain. Then he gasped out, 'Get a doctor. I—I'm shot.

Scott Jordan just—he just . . .' And then I heard a terrible gurgling noise and a loud thump and—"

She gave a gasp of her own and fell back a step as I landed on my feet in front of her. "Wait a minute! What are you trying to pull here? This is ridic——"

"Sit down!" It was a bark from Nola, with plenty of muscle behind it. "You had your chance to speak. You'll get another when I'm ready for you. Back in that chair." He turned to the woman. "Pardon the interruption, Miss Price. Finish your story."

She swallowed, regaining her poise. After all, I was under custody and this was a police station.

"I was terribly frightened, lieutenant." She gave a delicious shudder. "I rang the manager immediately and he told me to call the house doctor at once and then he went right to Room 705 himself. He opened the door with a passkey and he went in and found Mr. Banton lying on the floor, dead, bleeding all over a brand-new—"

"Thank you, Miss Price. That will be all. You can leave now."

She hated to relinquish the floor, but Wienick managed to nudge her out. The police stenographer was massaging his fingers. Nola regarded me without pleasure.

"You heard the evidence, Scott. You're a lawyer. How does it sound?"

At least he hadn't forgotten my first name. "Not good," I admitted. "But you've been in the trade a long time, John, and you know how it is with circumstantial evidence."

"Three witnesses, Scott. And a district attorney in New York County who would love to stick the gaff in. Like that, my friend, you can wind up in the armchair, waiting for some electricity. All he needs is motive."

"He doesn't need it," I groaned. "He's already got motive."

Nola sat up and looked at me sharply. "Maybe you'd better talk."

"Get rid of the pencil-pusher," I said.

Nola jerked his head toward the door and the stenographer got up and left. I leaned back and rubbed my forehead. I took a long unhappy breath and started talking.

"Late yesterday I was served with a paper. It requested my presence before the district attorney this morning . . ."

II

Naturally I was surprised. I had no idea why the district attorney wanted to see me. But a subpoena from the Rt. Hon. Phillip Lohman could not be lightly ignored. As I waited in the anteroom of his office at the appointed time I could hear him cracking down on one of his subordinates.

"You're the chief assistant, Bill. You assigned the man to the case and he's your responsibility. Two weeks shot to hell and still no indictment. If he can't handle it, say so, and I'll make the necessary changes. That's final. Now get Scott Jordan in here."

Bill Postilie poked his head through the door and crooked a finger at me. Postilie had been appointed to the D.A.'s office during the last administration and was one of the holdovers who kept the wheels running smoothly. We'd been through law school together and when I got this subpoena directing me to appear on the eighth floor of the County Courthouse I had tried to reach him for an explanation, but he hadn't been available.

Phillip Lohman stood near the window, a tall man, erect and unsmiling, his face stern, with a pair of pince-nez glasses clamped to the bridge of a high-boned nose. He eyed me coldly and motioned brusquely to a chair.

"Sit down, counselor."

If I am ever called upon to recommend some human guinea pigs to test the effects of an atomic fallout, Lohman would probably head my list. We hadn't crossed each other's path since the Mathew Tallant case, but he knew my sentiments and they were cordially reciprocated.

"Don't leave, Bill," he said to Postilie. "I want you to hear this."

Postilie nodded, blank-faced.

Lohman moved to his desk and sat down. He had been a corporation lawyer on Wall Street, a lobbyist in Washington, and a politician at Tammany. Now, as prosecutor of New York County, with his sights trained on the governor's mansion in Albany, he was given to periodic crusades, especially near election time.

During the past week the papers had been filled with his current campaign against divorce lawyers. He was digging up the records, checking decrees, and contesting their validity on the grounds of collusion. A lot of Manhattan lawyers were walking around with worried faces, tossing sleeplessly at night.

He made a pyramid with his fingers and leaned his elbows on the desk, meeting my eyes straight on. "I take it you don't like the laws of this state, Jordan."

"There's room for improvement."

"Not by you." His voice had the resonant ring of an accomplished public speaker. "Nor by any other private individual. Any change in the statutes is a job for the legislature. Exclusively."

I turned my palms up. "Look, Mr. Lohman, I don't know what you're talking about. What am I supposed to have done wrong?"

"Plenty. This office is going to charge you with suborna-

tion of perjury and manufacturing evidence in a trumped-up divorce case."

"Me?" I goggled at him, fingers taut-spread across my chest. "I seldom handle divorce matters at all."

"You handled one too many. Perhaps you don't remember. McIver vs. McIver."

"That was two years ago."

"Exactly." He smiled with heavy irony. "So you do remember."

I remembered all right. I had represented the author, Vincent McIver, whose novel *Manhattan Affair* was the current rage that year. I had been recommended to him when he wanted to sue his wife, Claire, for divorce, and it was the only legal work I ever did for the man. So far as I knew, that case was on the level. I glanced at Bill Postilie, but his continuing blank expression gave me no clue.

"What do you mean, suborning perjury?" I said to Lohman. "The woman was guilty of infidelity. We had incontrovertible proof and two disinterested witnesses. I knew one of them personally."

"Hazel Adams?"

"Yes, sir. She was Vincent McIver's secretary at the time and she suggested my name as a lawyer. She was present at the raid and I can vouch for her probity."

"No doubt," he said dryly. "But who can vouch for yours?"

"A lot of people. My kindergarten teacher, my scoutmaster, anybody who ever did business with me."

He was not amused. "You're in a bad spot, Jordan, and levity won't improve the situation. That divorce was collusive, the raid contrived, nothing more than a stage setting, and I believe we can prove it."

"How?"

"Your witnesses testified that they found Mrs. McIver in a

hotel room with a strange man. Do you know the man's identity?"

"No, sir. I did not participate in the raid."

"But you saw the snapshot."

"What snapshot?"

"Please, Jordan." There was a filing envelope on his desk. He rummaged inside and slid a picture across the desk. "Look for yourself."

The picture showed an ordinary hotel room equipped with the standard fixtures. Claire McIver sat on the edge of the bed, a boldly figured woman in a fragile negligee. The exploding flashbulb had nailed her to the print in a wide-eyed lugubrious pose. At her side stood a man in shirtsleeves, staring back over his shoulder as if startled by a sudden noise at the door. One hand was clenched and raised in a threatening gesture. He was tall, swarthy-faced, with muscular jaws and projecting brows, handsome in a rugged sort of way, although a little more space between the eyes would have helped.

"Well?" demanded Lohman.

The picture had surprised me. I was unaware that one had been taken. Nobody had thought it necessary to tell me. "I never saw this man before."

Lohman smiled frostily. "Too bad you're not under oath. Would you repeat that statement before a grand jury?"

"Any time. The man is a total stranger. Where did you get this picture?"

"Never mind that. It was taken at the scene of the raid by a private detective. The man you hired, Benedict Milo."

"No, sir," I said emphatically. "Benedict Milo was not hired by me. He was retained by Vincent McIver. The first time I ever saw Milo was when he walked into my office at McIver's request."

Lohman settled back with an air of skepticism. "All right, Jordan, let's hear your side of it."

I had nothing to hide and I needed no time for ingenuity or invention, so I gave it to him straight and unvarnished, knowing at the same time that nothing I said would make the slightest dent. And I remembered the incident as if it had been only yesterday.

"Vincent McIver had all the evidence he needed for a divorce when he came to see me. His marriage had been on the rocks for a long time and he suspected his wife of infidelity. That's why he hired a private detective and put Milo on her trail. But nothing happened for several weeks. Apparently she was being very discreet. Then, one afternoon, Milo put through an urgent call. He told McIver that Claire had met a strange man for lunch and he had followed them to a hotel. They were registered there. He needed another witness immediately, someone who knew Claire, someone who could make a positive identification and testify in court. McIver's secretary, Hazel Adams, was with him at the time, taking dictation."

"The girl who recommended you?"

"Yes. He asked her for an assist. At first she was a little reluctant, not wanting to get involved in her employer's domestic squabbles. But he pleaded and cajoled and applied pressure and told her it was an emergency and she finally gave in. He sent her over to the hotel. She met Benedict Milo in the lobby and he took her up to the room. I didn't know any pictures had been taken. Nobody told me. Naturally, under the circumstances, none were required. The law presumes intent when two people are found in—"

"I know the law." Sarcasm edged his voice. "Go on."

"Yes, sir. I came into the case at this point. McIver already had his evidence. I simply drew up the papers and com-

menced proceedings. If there was anything fishy about that raid, don't blame me. I know nothing about it."

"All right," he said with an air of exaggerated patience. "Wind it up."

"That's it. Claire hired her own lawyer, but he never appeared in court to defend. It was cut-and-dried. A referee heard the evidence and signed an interlocutory decree that was made final ninety days later. McIver was in Hollywood at the time and I sent him a copy. That's the last I heard of it until you sent for me this morning." I tapped the picture. "What makes you think the raid was collusive? This photograph corroborates my story."

"On the contrary. The photograph negates it."

"How?"

"The man you see there with Claire McIver, the corespondent, is Steve Banton."

I shook my head. "Sorry. The name rings no bell."

"Not much," he said with acid precision. "Steve Banton was McIver's chauffeur at the time of the raid."

It was news to me. "What is that supposed to prove?"

"Plenty. On the face of it McIver's wife was unfaithful. He must have known the man's identity. But he did not fire him. He kept Banton employed for more than a year after the divorce." Lohman leaned forward and emphasized each word by stabbing a finger against his desk. "Any self-respecting man with knowledge of that kind would have sent his chauffeur packing at once. With one exception, Jordan. Just one. If the raid itself was phony, collusively arranged in advance, if Steve Banton was in that room with Mrs. McIver at the request of his boss. Naturally, in that event he would not be fired. He might even get a raise."

I saw his point and it bothered me. I glanced again at Bill Postilie, but the poker-faced mask was still in place.

Lohman sighted along his extended forefinger like Uncle Sam exhorting citizens to buy Liberty Bonds. "There is only one ground for divorce in this state. Infidelity. And the legal requirements for proving it are rigid and inflexible. It takes a lawyer's training to write the script and stage a raid that will hold up in court. I believe you're the author of that script, Jordan, and what's more I intend to prove it."

I said, "Why don't you check my story with the people involved?"

"We did. Milo denied complicity."

"Naturally. It might cost him his license. Did he admit who hired him?"

"Yes. McIver. But that means nothing. I never said you were stupid, Jordan. You would at least be shrewd enough to stay in the background and give instructions."

"How about Hazel Adams?"

"There was no reason to tell her the truth. She'd be more effective as a witness if she thought the raid was on the level."

"And Steve Banton?"

"Clammed up when he saw the picture. He refused to talk and we couldn't shake him loose."

"Have you spoken to Vincent McIver?"

A sardonic smile brushed Lohman's lips. "What for? Do you think he would tell the truth and help us prove that his own divorce was collusive, thus taking the risk of invalidating his present marriage? Not a chance. We don't like to waste our time."

"And Mrs. McIver, what does she say?"

His chin veered up and he gave me a quick, sharp look. "We haven't questioned her."

"How come? I thought your office always boasts that it leaves no stone unturned during an investigation."

"We'd have to turn over a mighty big one to question Mrs.

McIver," he said with a wry twist to his mouth. "A gravestone. Where were you last year during November?"

That was seven months ago and I remembered that I was in Acapulco soaking up the sun. "In Mexico on vacation."

He glanced at Postilie. "Tell him, Bill."

In a matter-of-fact voice Postilie said, "Claire McIver was killed by a hit-and-run driver up in Van Cortlandt Park, the Bronx. She had a flat tire and she stepped out into the middle of the road to stop a passing motorist. It was late at night and apparently he didn't see her. Death was instantaneous."

I had no feelings at all. I had never met Claire McIver. She was a total stranger, and in a city of eight million people death is a commonplace event. You read about it in the papers every day.

Lohman sat back and tried to sound reasonable. "Why don't you co-operate, Jordan?"

"You want me to make a statement?" I shrugged. "Okay. Here it is. I know nothing about collusion and I never faked a raid in my life. Have that typed out in triplicate and I'd be happy to sign all three copies."

He chilled instantly. "So that's the way you want it. All right, Jordan. Hear this, my office means business. We've been aware of the pernicious deceits practiced on the divorce courts of this state for a long time. Lawyers like yourself have been flouting the law, hiring shady detectives and suborning perjury. That sort of thing is finished. We're digging into the records and we're going to lower the boom on a lot of people. Heads are going to roll, counselor, and yours may lead the parade. Anything you'd like to say before you leave?"

"I'll say it in court."

"You'll have your chance, believe me." His head snapped

around to Postilie in a gesture of dismissal. "All right, Bill, let's see those other files."

The interview was over. Neither of them was paying any attention to me. I walked out and took the elevator down to Foley Square. The Supreme Court Building loomed up on the next block, solid, dignified, and impregnable. I stood uncertainly for a moment, with traffic boiling up around me, wondering where to start in order to clear myself. If Lohman could substantiate his claim, the Bar Association was going to take a very dim view of my franchise to practice law.

At the first mention of Steve Banton's name, Lieutenant Nola had stirred with alert interest, eyeing me closely. Now he removed the thin dappled cigar that he habitually smoked from between his teeth and rode forward in his chair. "Then Steve Banton was the corespondent in that case."

"Apparently."

"And nobody ever told you?"

"That's right."

"Not even the girl, Hazel Adams, the one who recommended you?"

"Not even her."

"She was a close friend of yours?"

"Very close—at one time."

Nola pulled his brows together and made a tight mouth. "Sounds fishy. Why keep it a secret?"

"That's what I wanted to know."

"So you went to see her?"

"Not right then. I went back to my office first."

He settled back and clamped the cigar between his teeth again. It jiggled when he spoke. "Tell me about it."

III

As I entered the office, Cassidy looked up, her fingers hanging over the typewriter keys. Heading toward the inner room, I snapped my fingers. "Let's have the file on McIver vs. McIver."

Cassidy had an index-card memory. "We filed that one in the dust bins two years ago. What's brewing?"

"Trouble."

"Figures," she commented dryly. "You and trouble are synonymous. What happened at the district attorney's office?"

"Tell you in a moment."

Cassidy, my secretary, is fat, forty, and faithful. I inherited her from Oliver Wendell Rogers, my first boss, when he retired from private practice, forcing me to hang out my own shingle. I still kept in touch with Rogers, dining occasionally with him and his brother-in-law, a judge on the General Sessions bench. His bequest to me had been some sound advice and Cassidy's invaluable services. From the very beginning she had proved her worth. Her typing was awesome and her knowledge of legal forms unique. She could draw any document from a summons to a writ of certiorari without referring to the books. Cassidy was worth her weight in Harvard law clerks.

She listened frowningly as I told her about the district attorney's accusation. Then she marched into the storage room and emerged a moment later, blowing dust from an envelope.

After two years my recollection of the McIver case was a little hazy and I wanted to fix the details accurately in mind. I reread the papers.

Nicholas Strang, Claire's lawyer, had filed an appearance in her behalf, but neither of them showed up in court to defend. The hearing was held in May of that year before a referee. Both witnesses, Hazel Adams and Benedict Milo, had given their testimony. I half smiled, remembering Hazel's embarrassment in describing the raid. It had been her first time on a witness stand and she had seemed flustered and uneasy.

But the case was cut-and-dried, considering the evidence, and the judge endorsed the record as a matter of course. Among the papers I found a copy of the letter I had written to Vincent McIver when the interlocutory decree became final on the last day of August.

He had been in Hollywood at the time, adapting his novel *Manhattan Affair* for the screen. I had seen the picture, starring Amy Van Dorn. Amy, whose portrayal of the harassed mother had galvanized an indifferent picture into a box-office success. You old-timers must remember Amy Van Dorn from the silent films, a winsome and captivating ingenue before she graduated into character roles. The almost indestructible Amy, one of the few who managed to survive when the silent films suddenly found a tongue. And I remembered, too, the publicity that year. STAR WEDDED TO AUTHOR. AMY VAN DORN ADMITS SECRET MARRIAGE TO VINCENT MCIVER.

And that was the last I ever heard of the man, except for

an article I stumbled over in a fan magazine one afternoon in my dentist's office. Illness had forced Amy Van Dorn into retirement. She was an invalid now, living quietly with McIver up in Riverdale.

I got up and started out. Cassidy said, "There are some letters to be answered. Where are you going?"

"On a foraging expedition. To find proof that I'm innocent. You answer the letters. Your syntax is better than mine."

The day was brisk and clear as I headed south on Fifth Avenue. Traffic crawled awkwardly, like an endless caterpillar. On 42nd I managed some open-field running that got me safely across the street to a tall, narrow building. My destination here was a door on the sixth floor marked Ace Typing Service.

Inside were three desks in single file. Each held a machine manned by a female clattering away at full blast. All three females glanced up as I entered. The first was too thin, the second too chubby, and the third just right. A quick smile illuminated her face and she jumped up to greet me.

"Scott! This *is* a surprise." She drew me toward a glass-walled enclosure at the rear. "Let's get away from the noise."

No more employers for Hazel Adams. She was an entrepreneur now, with her own business, and it seemed to be thriving. She had struck out for herself two years ago, when Vincent McIver accepted the Hollywood assignment and let her go. I had checked the lease and drawn the papers and had acted as legal godfather for the Ace Typing Service.

An ambitious girl, Hazel, in a sensibly tailored suit that failed to hide a disquieting figure. She was tall and her dark, closely cropped hair looked alive. Her face had a gamin quality and her mouth was wide, with puckered corners. She put her hands on her hips and tilted her head sideways.

"Well," she said, "the vanishing lawyer. It's two months

since I saw you last. What happened, Scott? Telephone out of order?"

Seeing her now, the impudent eyes and the eager curve of her body, I couldn't really understand why I had neglected her. "Sorry," I said. "Business. I was tied up."

"Bachelor business, you mean. Don't look so guilty. Only my ego was bruised. Would you like to see my bruised ego?"

"Sure. But get some shades on that glass partition first. I feel like a goldfish in a bowl."

"You have an evil mind. Would you like to make a wager?"

"About what?"

"This visit. I'll bet it's business, not social."

"You'd lose. I'm after two things—some information now and a dinner date tonight."

She cocked an eyebrow. "Is the second a reward for the first or—oh, well, I'm easily bribed. What do you want to know?" Abruptly her voice lost its bantering tone and she regarded me seriously. "It's about the McIver case, isn't it?"

"Yes. I hear the district attorney's been asking you some questions."

A frown appeared between her eyes. "Strange questions, Scott. He seemed to be fishing for something. Do you know what he was after?"

"Yes," I said. "He was after my neck, also my reputation and my means of livelihood."

I gave it to her briefly. Hazel caught the picture at once and quick concern kneaded her face. "Oh, no," she said in a hollow voice. "Then it's all my fault. I'm responsible. Mr. McIver went to you on my recommendation. I don't know what to say, Scott. I feel terrible."

"Easy now," I said. "Nobody could foresee a development like this. Don't blame yourself for lack of omniscience. That

part of it is over and we'll get nowhere wailing and wringing our hands. We've got to lay the blame where it belongs."

"But you're innocent, Scott."

"Sure. We both know it, but we've got to prove it to the D.A." I pulled a chair around. "Here. Sit down and relax. I want you to think back. I want you to remember the details of that raid two years ago. All right?"

She nodded miserably.

"Do you recall meeting that private detective, Benedict Milo?"

"Yes."

"And going up to the hotel room?"

"Yes."

"Now, concentrate. I don't want any mistakes about this. There was a man in the room with Claire McIver. You got a good look at him and you recognized him, didn't you?"

Hazel turned away, her face suddenly masked. Silence hung over the small partitioned room, except for the muffled click of typewriter keys. I watched her for a moment, saw her biting the corner of her lip.

"It's no good," I said finally. "You can't hide the truth any longer. The truth is known and Lohman can prove it. He has evidence. The man with Claire was Steve Banton, McIver's chauffeur, wasn't he?"

"Yes." Her voice was barely audible.

"For Pete's sake, why all the secrecy? Why didn't somebody tell me? I was McIver's lawyer. I had a right to know."

She raised her face slowly.

"You're angry, Scott, and I don't blame you. Please try to understand my feelings. I'm not a prude; you know that. But I didn't enjoy being a witness at that raid. Nor did I enjoy testifying in court. There was something cheap and sordid about the whole spectacle. I had to force myself to

follow that detective. I didn't like him and I didn't like his leering expression. I didn't know what to expect when he opened the door. And then, when I saw Steve Banton and Claire together—those two—well, I was shocked, terribly shocked."

"Why? What difference did it make?"

"It made a lot of difference. Oh, I knew the McIvers hadn't been getting along, and I always felt that Claire had a playmate on the side. But her husband's chauffeur . . . after all. That's adding insult to injury. I knew Vincent and I understood his temperament. He's a man with pride and it would have been a bitter pill to swallow. Anyone else, yes, but not his own chauffeur, not a man on his payroll, a man he was supporting." She lifted her chin defiantly. "And I wasn't going to be the one who told him."

"Why not? He's a grown man."

"But what purpose would it serve? The thing had happened. It was over and done. Besides, he was finishing a new book at the time, working against a deadline, and I was afraid the news would upset him. So I did the next best thing. I kept my mouth shut."

"But you knew Milo had taken a picture."

"Yes."

"Didn't you expect he'd show it to McIver?"

"I asked him not to."

"Wasn't that a bit presumptuous?"

Her face reddened. "I suppose I deserve that. After all, I was only his secretary, but I was deeply involved in his work and I acted on impulse. I sincerely believed it was the best course at the time."

All right, I thought, *that explains why Banton didn't get fired.*

"Wasn't McIver curious? Didn't he ask questions?"

"No. He seemed embarrassed and after the incident he never mentioned Claire. He acted as if he was trying to forget her."

"Let's get back to the district attorney. When did he send for you?"

"Day before yesterday."

"And you didn't call me?"

"Call you? Oh, no, counselor." She shook her dark head emphatically. "I'd bite my tongue off first. You have my number in your little black book and—"

"Blue."

"All right, blue. I, too, have pride. You're a peculiar oaf, Mr. Jordan. You rush a girl breathless and then nothing. It's a blow to her ego. It makes her lose confidence, to say nothing about the money invested in beauty parlors and perfumes. Have I grown an extra nose or something?"

"I'll make amends."

"You can start right now." She tilted her face upward and closed her eyes and made her lips into a rosebud.

No man with red blood in his veins resists an invitation like that. I bent over her and pulled her close and covered her mouth with mine. Hazel wriggled comfortably and gave a small sigh. We bumped against the desk and I almost forgot my troubles. Almost, not quite. With great will power I managed to break contact.

Hazel glanced up from under her lashes, sleepy-eyed. And then a pink flush slowly suffused her face as she realized that the girls in the outside room had stopped typing and were grinning broadly at us. She gave them an icy glare which transported them back to the salt mines at once. A muffled clatter came through the partition.

"It's good for them," I said. "A small amount of diversion always increases the working girl's efficiency. I would have

liked to continue indefinitely, but I can't seem to keep my mind on romance at the moment."

"I'm sorry, Scott. Do you have another question?"

"Several. Tell me, you handled most of McIver's correspondence, his letters, phone calls, that sort of thing. Did you know he'd hired a private detective?"

She shook her head. "Some things he considered personal and confidential. I never heard of Benedict Milo until the raid."

"When McIver went to Hollywood after the divorce, did he take Banton along?"

"Not on the plane. Steve followed later with the car."

"Do you know when he was fired?"

"He wasn't. He quit, about five months ago."

"Any idea where he can be reached?"

She smiled archly. "I have more than an idea. I have knowledge. Steve Banton happens to be a very persistent gent and he's been trying to date me."

"Oh?"

"You might have the decency to look a little jealous, although he's not my type."

I assumed a fierce expression. "Where can I find him?"

"That's better. At the Wickford Arms."

"Well, now, isn't that a bit high priced for an ex-chauffeur?"

"More than a bit."

"Who's footing the bill?"

"Himself, I guess. He probably left Mr. McIver because he found something more profitable."

"What sort of man is he?"

"Sharp, Scott. Very sharp and very shrewd. Both eyes open all the time. An opportunist. I remember one afternoon it was raining and Mr. McIver asked him to drive me home.

There had been an accident and Steve pulled up to give one of the drivers his telephone number. When I objected that he couldn't possibly have seen the accident he smiled in a knowing way and said, 'Relax, baby. It's worth fifty bucks to this guy's lawyer for the right affidavit. A dollar is where you find it.'" She shuddered distastefully. "I never really feel comfortable when Steve is around. Perhaps I'm overly sensitive."

"Or acutely perceptive."

"Thank you, sir."

I reached for my hat. "Will you be ready at seven?"

"Ready and eager."

IV

The Wickford Arms was an apartment hotel, huge, stolid, and lofty. A watchdog in full regalia kept the front door revolving for some medium foot traffic, mostly female, fashionably attired. At this hour the males were elsewhere, earning enough money to pay the bills. Mirrors along the lobby walls threw my image back at me in multiple figures.

There was a small writing room through an archway to the left. I sat at one of the desks and addressed an envelope to Mr. Steve Banton. When I brought it up to the desk clerk, he glanced at the name, turned, and pegged it into box 705.

This saved me the bother of being announced and taking the risk of being turned down. I stepped into a high-speed elevator and was whisked smoothly to the seventh floor. Halfway down the hall I found the number. I knocked and waited. Silence. I knocked again, more strongly. The door opened about five inches and a pair of opaque eyes looked me over woodenly.

"Yes?" There was no friendliness in the voice.

"Steve Banton?"

"That's right."

"May I come in?"

He shook his head impatiently. "Whatever you're selling, mister, I'm not in the market."

"The name," I said, "is Jordan—Scott Jordan. It may be familiar to you."

There was a flicker of recognition, very brief, and then his eyes were again impenetrable. "Jordan?" he repeated. "The mouthpiece?"

"Lawyer," I said. "Attorney. I represented your old boss in his divorce action. Something urgent has come up and it needs clarification. I'd like to discuss it with you."

He didn't budge. "Go ahead. Make it brief. You've got thirty seconds."

I had come this far and I was in no mood for a brush-off. There was too much at stake. Steve Banton held the answer to several vital questions and I didn't want him to close the door in my face. And I could sense that he meant to do just that. So I leaned a hand against his chest and said, "Sorry, Steve, you're not a very good host."

His reaction was prompt and violent. He flung his arm up and knocked my hand loose. The door swung hard, but my foot was over the threshold and I threw my weight against it.

There was a frantic shuffle of feet as he braced himself. I had several pounds on him and I was making progress, slow but sure. I could hear his labored breathing—and then I heard something else. The elevator door had opened and through the corner of one eye I saw the woman emerge.

She came down the hall, small and timid. Her steps faltered uncertainly at the commotion and her eyes stretched wide. I tried to give her a reassuring smile, but it came out a grimace as I strained against the door. She gulped, "Oh, my!" and gathered her skirts, hurrying past me to another door down the corridor.

That seemed to be a cue for Steve Banton. He stepped away from the door and I tumbled through, almost losing

my balance. Some fancy calisthenics saved me and I recovered, crouching low, arms up, prepared for the onslaught. But it never came.

Banton was standing in the center of the room, hands hanging peacefully at his sides, a stilted smile on his lips. There was no trace of hostility in his manner at all. He opened his palms and spoke in a reasonable tone.

"Keep it calm, Jordan. No roughhouse. This is a high-class building and I wouldn't like to get tossed out." He waved magnanimously at a chair. "You got something on your mind, sound off. I'm listening."

I was surprised at his sudden capitulation, and wary. Was he making the best of a bad situation or did he have something up his sleeve?

I returned his smile. "I guess you know why I'm here."

He shrugged and waited.

"It's about the McIver divorce. That was two years ago. I thought the matter was closed, but the D.A. is stirring it up again. He showed me a picture taken at the raid. I don't know where he got the picture, but I do know the man's identity. You. He says you were planted there. He says the whole setup was collusive and arranged by me. He says he can prove it. If he does, I'm in trouble."

"He can't prove a thing."

"You sound confident."

"I am."

"Are you willing to co-operate with me?"

"How?"

"It all hinges on your relationship with Mrs. McIver. If you went to that hotel room as a favor to your boss, just to let a couple of witnesses see you for the purpose of testifying, that's one thing. On the other hand, if you and the lady

were caught by surprise in a romantic liaison, then the divorce was valid and I'm in the clear."

He looked at me, frowning. Then he shrugged with an air of candor. "Look, I don't mind talking. The lady's dead and nothing can hurt her reputation. I didn't go looking for trouble. She came to me. Her marriage was finished before I got the job. She was an aggressive dame, bored and restless. That hotel room was her idea. A bachelor like me never looks a gift horse in the mouth. You want to know if the raid took us by surprise. Hell, yes. I could have killed that guy with my bare hands, but a fight would have made it worse. Anyway, the whole thing was over before it began. He snapped his picture and backed out."

"Claire McIver—how did she take it?"

"She was upset, naturally. We checked out ten minutes later."

In my profession, listening to clients, cross-examining witnesses, appraising testimony, you develop an ear for the truth. I knew instinctively that Banton was a man untroubled by ethics or scruples, but in this instance I felt that he was on the level.

Which meant nothing, really.

Claire McIver could have inveigled him into the hotel. Her smile the hook, herself the bait.

"The D.A. had you on the carpet," I said.

"Yesterday morning."

"You refused to talk."

"Can you blame me?"

"But why?"

"I was rattled, that's why. I didn't know where I stood. I figured if I told the truth, maybe he's got me on some kind of morals charge. There's a law against adultery, isn't there? Why take the risk? I needed time to get organized."

"Weren't you worried about that picture, about McIver's reaction when he saw it?"

"Plenty. I should have busted that camera over the guy's skull, only it happened too fast."

"Did you expect to get fired?"

He folded his brows together. "You know, that's one angle I couldn't figure, why the ax never fell. Unless McIver wasn't shown the picture." His frown deepened. "I know that his secretary recognized me. But she never mentioned it and neither did I."

"All right, Steve. Will you tell the truth now if the D.A. keeps hacking away?"

"You guarantee to keep me out of a jam?"

"Absolutely." I had no recollection of any corespondent ever being brought to trial and convicted.

He grinned suddenly, square white teeth glistening against his dark skin. "Sure," he said shrugging. "What have I got to lose?"

Not that it would clear me. Lohman would consider Steve Banton's testimony to be a self-serving declaration. If he were guilty of collusion, nobody would expect him to admit it.

I pumped him for more information. The hotel raid, it seemed, had cooled Claire's ardor. He made a few pitches after that, but her defenses were up and he never got to first base. When I hinted that his living standards seemed high, he quickly grew remote and the co-operative phase ended. He seemed guarded and evasive, and I couldn't get him back on a productive basis. So I thanked him and told him good-by and he opened the door to let me out.

Down in the lobby I consulted a telephone directory. Benedict Milo was on Park Row, and Nicholas Strang, Claire's lawyer, had an office a few blocks south.

I used the fastest means of transportation in Manhattan,

the subway, and while the steel behemoth hurtled itself downtown with a deafening roar, I tried a fresh appraisal of the situation.

Milo could testify that it was Vincent McIver who hired him, not me. And Hazel could swear that she recommended me to McIver *after* the raid, which meant I couldn't possibly have set it up. Of course Lohman would try to minimize her testimony as prejudiced, but it couldn't be altogether ignored. I was almost smiling as I left the train at Chambers Street.

But my trip was in vain.

The door to Milo's office was locked.

And all I learned from a visit to Strang's office was that he had a connoisseur's eye for furnishings, both animate and inanimate. The expensive look of his anteroom was matched by the female in charge. Even if she couldn't spell, take shorthand, or even type, she seemed worth her keep from the standpoint of decoration. Her yellow hair blended nicely with the blondwood desk and her aquamarine eyes with the pale blue carpeting.

"Have you an appointment with Mr. Strang?" she asked, crisp and businesslike.

"No, ma'am. I was in the neighborhood and dropped by. It's a personal matter."

"I'm sorry. Mr. Strang is in court this afternoon. Shall I have him call you?"

"Please." I gave her a card. "It's rather important."

I reached the street and a decision at the same time. I had decided to talk it over with Vincent McIver himself.

A cab took me uptown to my garage.

V

The Buick's tappets hummed comfortably as I drove north on the West Side Highway. There were no stops until I reached the toll booth. At Riverdale I swung right and followed an overpass across the Parkway, pulling up at a gas station for directions.

The McIver place was half a mile back. This whole section seemed limited to upper-bracket incomes. No building contractor had cluttered the land with those eyesore duplications. Each house was separated by plenty of real estate, all of it carefully nurtured. Here and there I passed a modest chateau, set back in its own private botanical garden.

Candy-striped awnings identified the McIver house, a ranch-style building with picture windows. Its lawn, emerald-green and smooth as broadloom, sloped gently down to the edge of the Hudson River. The setting was calm and peaceful, as if time stood still. Off to the left sat a two-story garage, curtains fluttering at the upper windows. In front of it a silver-gray Bentley sedan waited sedately on the pebbled drive.

I parked beside it and ambled toward the house. Overhead, a seagull coasted along the sky on widespread wings.

I touched the button and heard the sound of distant chimes. Silence from within. After a moment I tried again.

Nothing. I was puzzled. A layout like this demanded some kind of staff, if not a butler or a housekeeper, a scullery maid at least.

I cocked my head, listening hard. Strains of music came from the other side of the house. I saw a path and followed it. At the rear was a flagstone terrace that commanded a really spectacular view of the Hudson.

The music came from a portable radio on a wrought-iron table. Beside the table sat a wheel chair, exposed to the sun, its occupant huddled under a plaid robe. Her eyes were following the sleek lines of a cabin cruiser as it skimmed along the water, churning a white foam in its wake. She sensed an alien presence and turned quickly.

"Oh . . . company. How nice!"

I had failed to recognize her, but the voice was familiar and then I knew. It came as a sudden shock.

"Mrs. McIver?"

"Yes." She reached out and switched off the radio.

Whatever her illness, it had exacted a harsh toll. She bore little resemblance to the Amy Van Dorn whose face and figure had adorned the nation's movie screens for over two decades. She looked wan, depleted. The raven-wing hair had faded to ash-gray and a fine tracery of lines was etched around her nostrils and mouth. The once expressive hands rested immobile in her lap. All that remained were her large brooding eyes and the striking voice.

"Sorry to intrude," I said, "but nobody answered my ring. I heard your radio and took the liberty of walking around."

"That's quite all right. Nettie must be in the laundry room. She can't hear the chimes when that machine is running. Are you a salesman?"

"No, ma'am. I came to see your husband."

"Oh." She seemed disappointed. A salesman's demonstra-

tion might help to break the monotony. "Vincent just drove into town for some medicine. I expect him back shortly." Her eyes brightened. "Are you from Brown and Wilcox?"

"Sorry."

"So am I. They're his publishers, you know." She sighed. "Poor Vincent. They turned down his last two books. So did everyone else, for that matter. He's dreadfully discouraged. Feels he's lost his touch, but I keep telling him it's only temporary. That sort of thing happens to most creative artists, especially when they live such insulated lives as we do here. Don't you think that's true?"

She went right on, without waiting for an answer, for like most invalids she was inclined to garrulity, even with strangers.

"Oh, I know what ails Vincent. At least I think I do. He needs a new slant, a fresh outlook, he should travel more." She gave her head a decidedly negative shake. "Of course, that's out of the question. He'd never consider leaving me. I'm being very selfish, I suppose, but I want him here with me—all the time."

She became aware of her sudden vehemence and relaxed with a deprecating gesture. "My goodness, I sound possessive. Are you a friend of Vincent's?"

"Well . . . a business associate, sort of."

"Then you probably know his attitude. I keep telling him it's quite old-fashioned. What he really wants is to assert his position as head of the family. Prove he can take care of me. He feels responsible, financially, I mean." She smiled fondly. "Quaint, isn't it? And so like Vincent. But hardly necessary under the circumstances."

I knew the circumstances. I had heard stories about Amy Van Dorn's shrewd instincts in business matters. During her earlier years of high earnings and low income taxes, she had

invested wisely. Gilt-edged securities, real estate mortgages, investment trusts, all of which had benefited by rising values under an expanding economy.

At the front of the house a horn tooted and we heard the sound of tires crunching along the pebbled drive.

Her eyes warmed. "That must be Vincent now."

It was, and he joined us a moment later, striding along the path. At the sight of me he stopped short, a vertical dent appearing between his eyes. Then he smiled and advanced quickly with his hand outstretched.

"Scott Jordan! Well, well, this is a surprise. How long has it been . . . two years, I'd say."

"Just about."

"Good to see you." He was pumping my hand vigorously.

He seemed untouched by time, at least externally, although normal wear and tear must have made some inroads on his interior plumbing. Vincent McIver was an idealized portrait of the successful author, debonair, polished, urbane. All those hours bent over a typewriter had failed to impair his carriage. He stood tall and straight, the skin firm and smooth on his lean, tanned face. He wore blue slacks, a blue sports jacket, and a blue ascot knotted around his throat.

He stooped to kiss his wife lightly on the cheek. "I see you two have met."

"Not formally," she told him.

He smiled. "Scott Jordan, who used to do some legal work for me—my wife, the former Amy Van Dorn."

"Will you stay for dinner, Mr. Jordan."

"You're very kind," I said, "but I have a previous appointment. May I have a rain check?"

"Any time," McIver put in. "I take it you're here on business."

"More or less," I said.

"Those old publishing contracts?"

He telegraphed a message by twitching his eyebrow and I nodded. "Paragraph three about joint control and reprint rights. Brown and Wilcox have an offer from—"

"I don't think Amy would be interested. Let's go inside. We won't be long, dear."

He had a medium-sized study, looking out over the river, very cozy, with book-lined walls and a fine desk of English walnut, on which rested a desolate typewriter, gathering dust. It would take will power to work in a room like this with the shades up. No wonder the muse had eluded him. A man could sit here and dream his way to senility.

"Thank you for catching my cue," he said. "No point in worrying Amy. She upsets very easily these days. I want her to be quiet, placid, free from excitement. Doctor's orders."

"Then you know why I'm here."

"Yes." He was frowning. "As a matter of fact I've been expecting your visit. Hazel Adams phoned and told me about her grilling by the district attorney." He loosened his ascot. "Something's in the wind, Jordan. What are they trying to do?"

"They're trying to invalidate your divorce from Claire."

"What?" He looked startled. "Are you serious?"

I nodded.

"But why?" He made a baffled gesture. "For the love of heaven, why? Claire is dead. She's been dead for seven months. What can they possibly hope to accomplish?"

"It's a crusade," I said. "You're not the only victim. They're digging through the records and any divorce that looks peculiar goes under a magnifying glass."

McIver tapped his forehead with a handkerchief. "Then we're safe. My divorce will stand up under any inspection. Claire was caught in *flagrante delicto*, and we have two wit-

nesses whose testimony is unimpeachable." His jaw clicked. "I'll go to see the district attorney myself. I'll set him straight. I'll tell him the truth."

"And just what is the truth, Mr. McIver?"

He looked at me, surprised. "What? I'm afraid I don't understand."

"You told me you hired Benedict Milo."

"Which I did."

"But you neglected to tell me about the picture."

"What picture?"

"The one Milo took at the raid, of Claire and the man who was with her."

If his performance was simulated, for my benefit only, he rated an Oscar. "Are you telling me that Milo actually snapped a picture of the raid?"

"He did."

McIver shook his head, overwhelmed. "By God, it's hard to believe."

"He never mentioned it to you?"

"Not a word."

So far his reaction confirmed my own findings. Nothing new yet.

"Aren't you curious?" I asked.

"About what?"

"The man's identity. You knew Hazel Adams had seen him, yet you made no effort to question her. Most husbands in your position would have demanded information."

"Most husbands, Jordan, not all. You ask me why? Because I didn't really care. At that stage of the game, Claire meant nothing to me at all. She had been going her own way for a long time. We were no longer man and wife, not as society understands that term. I learned her true character soon after our marriage—and it was a shock, believe me. Claire

was dissolute, amoral, wanton. For her it was a marriage of convenience. It was hard at first, until I became inured. And after that—" he shrugged expressively—"we simply tolerated each other. My sole function was financial. I supported her and paid the bills."

He closed his eyes tiredly, pinching the bridge of his nose. More was coming, I knew, and I waited.

"Toward the end she became fantastically extravagant, clothes and jewels without end. That was when I decided to get rid of her. So I hired a private detective. I knew that he would have no difficulty in getting the necessary evidence. When he did, I was pleased. I accepted it. Her lover? What difference did it make? He was not alone."

"This one might have made a difference."

"Why?"

"Because he used to work for you."

"For me?" McIver's fingers were spread across his shirt.

"Your chauffeur—Steve Banton."

He digested this for a moment, and then a pulse throbbed across the tangled veins in his forehead. He asked in a still voice, "Are you sure?"

"I saw the picture."

"Why didn't Hazel tell me?"

"She was trying to spare your feelings."

It was a blow to his pride more than anything else. He stood there, his ego bleeding, white lines framing his mouth.

"Right under my nose," he said, "and I never suspected. I must have been blind." He walked stiff-kneed to the window. "And all the time he must have been laughing behind my back. Taking my money and laughing. I kept him on the job. He stayed with me until five months ago. He—"

"Throttle down," I said. "That hotel incident was the first

time. They had a couple of drinks and then the raid broke it up."

"How do you know?"

"I've been checking."

"Why did Milo keep it a secret?"

"He probably had his reasons."

"What do you mean?"

"If the man was unscrupulous, he could use the picture, make it pay off."

McIver was watching me. "How?"

"Suppose Claire found herself a new fiancé. Suppose she wanted to get married again. Here was Benedict Milo with a highly damaging picture that might break up the romance. It could be used as a lever to pry some money out of her. She might be willing to buy it back."

"Blackmail?"

"That's one name for it."

"How low can a man get?"

The question was rhetorical and I didn't bother to answer. He was an author and presumably aware of human frailties. "Did you ever see her after the divorce?"

"Once. A chance meeting several weeks before her accident. I asked her to have a drink with me and she accepted. She seemed troubled, upset, and nervous. She volunteered no information and I asked for none."

"Would her lawyer know anything?"

"Nicholas Strang? Perhaps. Look here, Jordan. All this is beside the point. You say the district attorney is claiming collusion. On what evidence?"

"On his belief that you knew the identity of Claire's boy friend, knew it was your own chauffeur, and yet failed to sack him. From that he draws a conclusion: Banton was not

Claire's lover at all. He was caught in that room simply as a favor to you."

"That's not true."

"We have to prove it."

"And if we can't?"

"The divorce may be set aside."

"How would that affect my marriage to Amy?"

"Bigamous and invalid."

He stood mute, looking stunned. Then he sank into a chair and sat there, squeezing his kneecaps. No sound out of him for a moment. Then his voice was hoarse.

"They can't do that. We mustn't let them. Good Lord, look at the consequences. You can see for yourself the condition Amy's in. The doctors say she can't live more than a year as it is, and I'd like that year to be a good one. As good as possible under the circumstances. The way she feels about me, this sort of thing can finish her."

Moisture formed along his temples. He brought himself under control with an effort.

"Let me tell you something, Jordan. With all her Hollywood experience, Amy has some very strict notions about morality. It's part of her background, her upbringing. Her people were Mennonites and she lives according to the code. In all those years, working in that film colony, with its lack of principle, its debaucheries, and its artificial customs, she stood out as an example of clean and decent living. Not one single breath of scandal ever touched her name or her career." He shook his head violently. "Good Lord, if she thought we'd been living together all this time, unmarried, in—in sin . . ." His voice trailed off and he gave me a desperate look. "You've got to stop it, Jordan. Right now. Before it goes any further."

"I'm trying."

He exhumed a sickly smile. "You must bend every effort."

"I intend to. For my own sake as well as Amy's."

The inner edges of his eyebrows came together. "How's that?"

"It's quite simple. My professional standing is at stake. Only lawyers are supposed to know the exact evidence required to support an action for divorce in this state. It's Lohman's contention that I arranged the whole thing, and if he can make the charge stick, I may be suspended, or possibly disbarred."

"But that's ridiculous."

"I agree."

He frowned thoughtfully. "How did the district attorney get that picture anyway?"

"Perhaps Milo can enlighten me. I intend to find out."

"Do that. And keep me apprised, Jordan. If I can help, with money or anything—" He paused at the sound of an automobile horn and turned his head.

A moment later the front door opened and a male voice called out, "Hello. Where is everybody?"

Vincent McIver stiffened and chilled perceptibly. "In here," he called back, forcing his voice to sound cordial.

A man appeared in the doorway, and a woman behind him. The man advanced briskly, hand outstretched. McIver took it, smiling, but the smile was strictly technical and did not reach his eyes.

"Arnold. How are you?"

They broke the handshake at once, as if their palms had closed an electrical circuit, giving them both an unpleasant shock. An air of palpable hostility was disguised by a thin coating of formality.

The formality was extended to an introduction.

"Scott, this is Arnold and Irene Parish. Irene is Amy's niece. Scott Jordan, my attorney."

We made the usual polite remarks. Irene Parish was a tall woman in a tailored suit, haughty, with a glacial smile, her eyes probing my face. What kind of law business was I handling for McIver? She was almost curious enough to ask.

Arnold Parish matched her in height, but there was too much meat for the framework. His face looked flabby, but not weak. He had the quick bright eyes of a bird and a professionally agreeable manner, like a doctor or an automobile salesman. His gray tweed topcoat, with its velvet collar, gave him a slightly rakish appearance.

He said, "Just driving by. Thought we'd drop in and say hello to Amy."

"Glad you did," McIver told him with false enthusiasm.

"Is she feeling any better?" asked Irene.

"About the same."

"I hope she isn't resting."

"No. She's out on the terrace."

"Good. We know she loves company. Will you take her south this winter?"

"I don't think she's up to it."

"The doctor should decide that. And you know how Amy hates the cold weather."

McIver, I saw, was keeping himself under admirable control. Irene's autocratic tone was getting under his skin. Arnold Parish eased the friction by taking his wife's arm.

"Come, Irene, let's join Amy on the terrace. Will you be out soon, Vincent?"

"In a moment."

"Good. Amy asked me about some of her securities. I collected a lot of data. You might want to listen in." He guided his wife through the door, still holding her arm.

"You might want to listen in," McIver mimicked savagely. "Wasn't that goddam nice of him!"

"Is he Amy's adviser?"

"On some things, yes. An investment counsel, he calls himself." McIver shoved his hand out. "Will you call me, Jordan?"

"As soon as I know anything."

"Good-by, then."

He was so anxious to join the others he didn't bother to show me out.

Traffic on the southbound lane was fairly light. Under the darkening sky the river had a look of flawed metal. I touched the gas pedal and the Buick responded eagerly. Sailing along at fifty miles an hour made me think of Amy Van Dorn, imprisoned in her wheel chair, dreaming of her lost triumphs.

And yet not lost entirely.

Preserved on celluloid and transmitted through ether, her talent was now a staple on countless television screens, absorbing housewives by day and insomniacs by night. She could sit back and view herself in the full bloom of youth.

Would there be any solace in that for Amy Van Dorn? Not much, I thought. The acclaim, the luster, the adulation, all that was forever gone. Only a shell remained, and soon that would be gone too.

Her death would rate a column in the obituaries. The public would cluck sadly and proceed to forget. After the funeral Vincent McIver would dry his eyes and reach for comfort in a bottle of old Scotch and the arms of a young blonde.

The niece, Irene Parish, had struck me as a singularly cold item. The amount of her grief, I felt, would be measured by the size of her inheritance. I doubted if Arnold Parish would feel anything at all.

I cut off the highway at the 79th Street exit, looking forward to a shave and some fresh haberdashery before my date with Hazel. When I pulled up at the curb, the doorman ducked forward and reached for the handle.

"Park it for me, will you, George?"

There was a curious expression on his face as we changed places behind the wheel.

"Don't go into the building," he told me through the side of his mouth, not moving his lips. "Couple of guys waiting for you. Take off, quick."

But it was too late. Sergeant Wienick and his sidekick had already spotted me.

"And that," I said to Lieutenant Nola, "brings you up to date. Steve Banton was alive when I left him."

VI

Four cigar stubs in the ash tray and a fifth smoking itself between his teeth. His eyes on mine were grave. "Three witnesses," he said quietly.

"That's true, but you can't always draw the obvious conclusion. I don't say these people are lying. Two of them, I know, are telling the truth. But that telephone operator, how can she be sure it was Banton's voice?"

"The door was locked and there was nobody else in the room."

"Nobody else in the room when the manager got there. And those hotel doors lock automatically."

He leaned back. "Have you ever met the telephone operator before?"

"No."

"You think she pulled your name out of a hat?"

"Suppose I admit Banton mentioned it. He could have been delirious, with his life running out of a bullet hole. He'd just seen me and my name was fresh in his mind."

Nola regarded me thoughtfully.

"Do you think I killed him, John?"

"I won't be sitting in the jury box."

"That's not the question. Am I guilty?"

"Can you prove otherwise?"

"Not if I'm locked up. I need a chance to work on it."

His hand slapped the desk. "What am I supposed to do, Scott? Forget the evidence? Apologize for bringing you down here? We have a murder victim in the morgue and we have a suspect in custody. We can prove means, opportunity, and motive. If I let you walk out of here they'd skin me alive."

"Not necessarily. You can let me go in order to keep a check on my movements. Isn't that standard operating procedure in some cases? If you book me now, I may not be able to get bail. And you know Lohman. He'd jump at a chance to crucify me. I've got to chase it down myself."

"What can you do that we can't?"

"Nothing perhaps. But I know these people. I've had dealings with them. Suppose you lock me up. Suppose the brass is satisfied with the evidence and keeps you from working on it. What chance will I have? And you can cover yourself. You can assign a man to tail me."

For a moment he sat still, his face caught by conflicting emotions. "How much time, Scott?"

"Forty-eight hours."

He grimaced. "When Lohman hears we had you and let you throw the hook, he'll go up in smoke."

"Lohman can pick me up any time. This is my home. I'm in business here. I wouldn't risk my whole future by taking a powder just because of a little circumstantial evidence."

"A little?"

"That's just it, John. It's too pat. Can you see me killing a man and then leaving a trail a mile wide? Showing myself to the desk clerk, forcing my way into Banton's room, and leaving without making sure he was dead?"

He squinted against the upward-drifting smoke, silent.

"Presumably, you still don't know that I had any motive.

Tell Lohman you decided to give me a little rope in order to complete the case. I'll call you from time to time and report. If the going gets too rough I'll turn myself in."

He looked past me. "Aren't you scared?"

"Sure I'm scared."

"Don't you want to visit the Men's Room?"

"I'm not that sc—"

"You know where it is, the end of the corridor."

I turned quickly and walked out of his office. Nobody stopped me. The desk sergeant didn't even look up. Outside, I drew a breath and felt the dampness on my skin condensing in the chilled air.

Forty-eight hours? I didn't really have that much time. As soon as Phillip Lohman knew the facts he'd start yelling for my arrest.

I had a date and I was late.

Hazel opened the door with a chip on her shoulder. She folded her arms, regarding me frostily. "Seven o'clock, you said."

"Sorry. I was unavoidably detained."

"Why didn't you phone? You let me wait here, starving. I swore I'd kill you if you stood me up, especially after I bought a new dress. Maybe I will anyway."

"Not in the hall," I said. "Kill me inside."

She stepped aside and then closed the door, unrelenting. "First I want an explanation. After that I want the finest steak in the most expensive restaurant in town."

"You're entitled."

She pirouetted. "Do you like my dress?"

"Uh-huh."

"You don't sound very enthusiastic."

"I never pay much attention to the packaging. It's the contents that interest me."

"Ha! You're maligning a billion-dollar industry. Don't talk like that in front of Dior or Schiaparelli. They'd have your life."

But the dress was a treat and she modeled it beautifully. A cocktail gown, champagne in color and just as frothy, with a cut artfully designed to raise a man's temperature. Even in my present state, worried and preoccupied, Hazel saw my admiration, and her pique began to dissolve.

"Thirsty, Scott?"

"Parched. I'd like a martini, very dry."

She went to a portable bar. "One martini, coming up."

"May I help?"

"I know the formula," she declared loftily. "Gin, vermouth, and cyanide." She prepared the ingredients in a chrome shaker, applying the vermouth with an atomizer, and substituting a twist of lemon peel for the cyanide. I drank. It was very dry indeed and the gin left me a trifle lightheaded.

"Another?" she asked.

"Not unless you can handle me."

"Does that mean I have to get you drunk?"

"Helps. I'm very shy."

"Then we're doomed. I'm not as bold as I look. Nor as churlish."

"Churlish. Well, well . . ."

"I worked for a writer once, remember? Some of it must have rubbed off. Anyway I'm sorry I scolded. It's just that I thought you'd forgotten our date. After my investment in this dress, two weeks income, none of it tax-deductible—"

"Forgive me. I should have phoned."

"Why didn't you, Scott?"

"I couldn't. The police wouldn't let me."

"The police?"

"Yes. They were giving me the third degree."

She wore her martyred smile. "Oh, come now—"

"It's true. By tomorrow morning it'll be in all the papers. The fact is I wouldn't be here at all if a friend of mine hadn't stuck his neck out."

She peered closely and saw that I was serious and her face went tense with quick concern. "But why, Scott? What have you done?"

"Nothing. Somebody else did it all."

"Did what?"

"Tried to frame me for murder."

She gasped, her eyes huge.

"This afternoon," I said. "When I left you and called on Steve Banton. At first he refused to talk, then he changed his mind. We had a brief chat. His health was good when I left him. But somebody changed that. Changed it with a .32-caliber bullet that stopped his heartbeat."

Hazel's fingers flew to her mouth. She swallowed twice before her voice would function. Then it came out high-pitched and incredulous.

"Steve Banton . . . dead . . ."

"Very. Unless the medical examiner doesn't know his business. They accused me of the deed."

"*You?*" It was a blurt of indignation.

"Yes." She listened intently, bottom lip caught between her teeth, while I sketched in the details. "So you can see, I'm in a highly untenable situation."

"What are you going to do?"

"Hang it on somebody else. If I can. Lieutenant Nola gave me forty-eight hours."

"And then?"

"He'll be forced to book me on suspicion of homicide."

She turned away. Pain shadowed her eyes. Her lips quivered. "It's all my fault. I guess I'm just bad luck. You're in

this mess because I introduced you to Mr. McIver." She swallowed bravely. "We don't have to go out tonight. I'll open some cans and—"

"No, ma'am." I was firm. "We can't deprive the public of a chance to see that dress. Besides, I've got some more questions and I don't have to ask them here. We're dining out as scheduled."

She put up a token resistance and capitulated. An oyster-white tunic of sheared beaver was over her shoulders as we sallied forth. My preference tonight was one of the hotels, where the pace was leisurely and the music unobtrusive. We settled on the Bohemian Room.

String instruments only in the orchestra, no brass. Hazel created a mild stir from the male contingent as we followed the major dee to a corner table. He hovered solicitously, pad ready in his hand.

"Saratoga cocktail," Hazel told him.

I looked at her curiously. "What's that?"

"Brandy, bitters, maraschino, and pineapple."

On top of gin and vermouth? Not for me. "Have the chef put a couple of sirloins on the fire, medium rare," I said.

Not until they arrived did I realize how hungry I was. We left the bones as clean as if they'd been sandpapered. Hazel settled back with a contented sigh.

"Cigarette, please."

I gave her one, and held a match.

"Now I'm strong enough to talk," she said.

"Tell me some more about Steve Banton. Anything. What kind of a man was he?"

"An angle boy, Scott. Always talking about the plans he had, the grandiose schemes, trying to impress on me that he was only marking time as a chauffeur."

"What kind of schemes?"

"He didn't specify. He spoke in generalities, trying to give the impression he always had a deal cooking."

"You never suspected him and Claire?"

"Never. They were either very clever or very cautious. That's why I was so shocked when I saw them together. You see . . ."

"What is it, Hazel?"

She was hesitant. "Claire is dead and I'm not sure I ought to say anything that might—"

"For Pete's sake! People are always afraid of hurting the dead. I don't get it. Why protect the memory of someone who deserved no respect when alive? There must be something wrong with a culture that venerates corpses. Let's be more considerate of the living. Me, for example. I'm in a serious jam, and if you can shed any light on this thing, talk up. What about Claire?"

Smoke from her cigarette curled up between us.

"There was another man in the picture, a friend of the family, and I had a distinct impression he was more than a friend."

"Who?"

"Nicholas Strang."

I exhaled softly. "Well, that's turning a new page altogether. Nicholas Strang. Claire's lawyer. Tell me more."

"There isn't much to tell. Vincent liked to work evenings, but Claire was restless, she craved excitement, so Strang, the obliging friend, always willing to lend a hand, would fill in. And it was no chore, believe me. He enjoyed the work."

"McIver didn't mind?"

"I don't think he cared one way or the other. Will you explain something to me, Scott?"

"If I can."

"Strang represented Claire in the divorce. How come he never showed up at the hearing?"

"Because he didn't defend. He let the case go by default."

"Why?"

"Several reasons. Suppose he put Claire on the stand. What would it accomplish? How could she explain her presence in the hotel room? It was hopeless and Strang realized that. There were other considerations, too. A courtroom case of that kind always draws reporters. They would have lapped it up. Strang was trying to avoid unsavory publicity. He had no other alternative. He had to let the case go by default."

"Maybe it wasn't a bona fide raid after all." She was frowning. "Maybe I was duped into being a witness. Have you spoken to Strang?"

"Not yet. He's been out."

Musicians on the bandstand were tuning their instruments.

"I don't feel much like dancing," Hazel said.

"Neither do I."

"I won't mind if you take me home."

In the cab, she groped for my hand, her eyes suddenly moist. "Oh, Scott, I'm sorry. If only I hadn't—"

"Stop it," I said.

"But—"

"Listen to me. These guilt complexes will make you neurotic and you won't be any good to me at all."

The cab stopped in front of her apartment and I took her up. Holding the key in her hand, she looked at me soberly. "Where are you going from here?"

"No place. I'm staying with you."

"What's this?"

"I can't go home."

"Why not?"

"I'm expecting visitors from the D.A.'s office. They'll probably be armed with a warrant for my arrest."

"But the police let you go."

"That doesn't mean I'm out of the woods. I need a place to stay. If I go to a hotel, somebody may recognize me. Any calls I made would have to go through a switchboard. A moment ago you wished there was something you could do. This is it. Your sofa looked fairly comfortable and I promise I'll behave. So long as you don't go parading around in one of those seductive negligees, you'll be safe enough. And if you want to charge me for room and board—"

"Oh, shut up." She opened the door. "Come on in."

VII

My first stop the next morning was Nicholas Strang's office. I entered the elevator, feeling old and stiff.

Hazel's breakfast had been good for my stomach, but her sofa had been tough on my spine. Sofas are designed for sitting, not sleeping. I doubt if I could have slept with a lungful of ether on a mattress of clouds. With my brain whirling it had been impossible to relax, and I was relieved when the first splinters of dawn brought unfamiliar objects into focus.

I had not phoned Strang in advance. This time, however, he was in. The cool but decorative secretary spoke over the intercom and ushered me through.

Nicholas Strang came around his desk to shake my hand. "Good to see you, Jordan. First time we've met personally, but I've heard a lot about you."

He seemed to possess a reservoir of untapped energy. He had a dark square face and ink-black hair combed smoothly back from a sharp widow's peak. His features were serviceable and his manner exuded confidence.

I have encountered various types of lawyers. Strang was the congenial kind, hearty, his manner bidding you to relax, you had nothing more to worry about, you were in competent hands now, your troubles were his troubles. You had to pay

for this service, of course, but what was money compared to a free mind?

"Saw the papers this morning," he said. "They were full of the Banton affair." His eyes on mine were sharp and observant. "The accounts were vague, but I got the impression you were involved."

I waved it off. "Mostly inconvenience. There had been some attempt to implicate me, but nobody took it seriously. Still, I am under a bit of a cloud and I'd like to clear it up. You may be able to help."

"Me?" He seemed surprised. "How?"

On instinct alone I had the feeling that Nicholas Strang could be trusted about as far as a hanging judge in a Star Chamber proceeding.

"You were Claire McIver's attorney and, I understand, a close personal friend."

"Banton was murdered yesterday and Claire's been dead for some time. I don't see the connection."

"Neither do I, yet. There must be one though. After all, they spent some time together in a hotel room. Steve Banton was the corespondent in her divorce action."

He stood up slowly. He leaned over the desk. He stared at me as if I had just insulted his mother. In a quietly acid voice he said, "Tell me, who the devil is trying to spread a canard like that?"

"It happens to be a fact."

"Steve Banton and Claire? That's absurd."

"Why?"

"The man was nothing but a chauffeur."

"That wouldn't impair his efficiency as a lover."

"Please." He was nobly forbearing. "You never met Claire, did you?"

"No."

"She was a lady, Jordan. A lady right down to her fingertips. She had taste and she had discrimination. She would never get involved with a man like Banton. He was not her type. The fellow had no class, no breeding."

"He had a good physique."

Strang was not annoyed. "Where in the world did you get this fantastic notion?"

"From the district attorney."

"Eh?" It was a grunt of surprise.

"That's right," I said. "From Phillip Lohman himself. He has proof. Conclusive. Incontrovertible."

"What kind of proof?"

"A snapshot of the room and its occupants. Steve Banton's identity is unmistakable."

There was a hard puckered look around Strang's eyes. He didn't speak for a moment. "Are you sure?"

"I saw the picture myself."

He sat down and shook his head slowly. "This comes as something of a—a blow to me. I was a close friend of Claire's and I—well, I just never suspected."

Ah, Strang, I thought, *you're not really suffering, are you?*

Aloud, I said, "Why don't you have more faith?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Why is everybody so quick to believe the worst? I didn't know there were so many dirty minds in the world. There didn't have to be anything between those two."

"What are you driving at?"

"She may have invited Banton into her room merely for the purpose of a contrived raid, to expedite the divorce."

"You mean collusion?"

"According to the district attorney, yes."

"Is that true, Jordan?"

"Are you asking me?"

"Well, you handled the action, instituted proceedings, you ought to know."

I shook my head. "No," I said. "I did not arrange it."

"Then who did?"

I grinned at him. At least I showed my teeth. "Maybe you did. That's the only conclusion I can reach. That you worked it all out with Claire and told McIver to hire his own lawyer. I was just a patsy."

He was up on his feet again, his face stiff, his neck red, inching out of its collar. "I don't like the implication there, Jordan. What happened? Has Lohman accused you of complicity? Are you trying to pass the buck? Well, it won't work. My skirts are clean on this."

"Simmer down, Strang. You have nothing to worry about. Only two other people know the truth, Claire and Banton, and they're both dead."

He had control of himself now.

"Look here, Jordan, I'm not going to honor your insinuations by throwing you out of my office, because if you're serious, if you believe what you say, then you're a sick man, you need psychiatric help."

I smiled. "Just tossing up a trial balloon. I'm not really worried about the divorce. There's a far more serious charge pending against me. Sit down, please. We're both members of the Bar. We've got to help each other."

"I know nothing about Banton."

"But you do about Claire. I heard you were having dinner with her the night of the accident. Did she tell you where she was going when she left?"

"No. She merely said she had a business appointment. She offered no other explanation. Frankly, Jordan, I was so damned annoyed I asked for none."

"What about the accident?"

"There isn't much to tell. Apparently she got a flat and tried to flag somebody down for help. I guess the guy didn't see her until it was too late."

"Hit-and-run?"

"Yes. But not until after the guy stopped and came back for a look at her and saw she was dead. He saw her jewelry, too. She was loaded that night. I guess he figured she wouldn't be needing it any more and he stripped her."

"I didn't know that. Was it insured?"

"Yes. National Indemnity."

"Any of it turn up?"

"Not a single piece."

"Did they pay off?"

"Naturally. To her only living relative, an aunt, Theresa Gould."

"Who probated the will?"

"No will. She died intestate. I handled the administration."

"And the estate went to Mrs. Gould?"

"That's right." He paused as the buzzer sounded and reached for the handset, listening. I saw the brief flicker in his eyes and I knew the wheels were turning in his head. He said, "No, Miss Frank, don't bother. I'll come out and sign the papers."

He hung up, got to his feet, and looked at me apologetically. "Excuse me for a moment. Be right back."

He was acting too nonchalant as he made sure the door was closed. A warning bell rang in the back of my head. All he had to do was sign a paper. Why didn't he let the girl bring it to his desk? Strang didn't strike me as the kind of employer who would be anxious to save his secretary a little exercise.

I leaned across to the telephone and lifted it gently. Almost immediately I caught my own name, uttered in Strang's

baritone. "Jordan is in my office now. I heard over the radio this morning that you were looking for him."

"Good." That was Lohman's voice, crisp and determined. "Keep him there."

"I'll do my best."

"We'll have some men at your office in a couple of minutes."

They broke the connection and I cradled the instrument. A new role for Nicholas Strang, the public-spirited citizen, doing his share toward apprehending a dangerous criminal.

Or maybe he didn't like the trend of our talk. Maybe he wanted me out of the way, to prevent me from nosing around.

I was back in my chair when the door opened. "Sorry to keep you waiting, Jordan. Couple of motion papers had to be filed." On his face, an affable smile. He reached for the humidor and offered me a long Havana filler. "Try one of these," he said. "Made from selected leaves in Cuba, especially to my order." In his other hand a lighter, already flaming.

I put the cigar in my pocket. "Thanks. I only smoke cigars after dinner. I'll try this one tonight. You've been very helpful." I started to rise.

He made a detaining gesture. "Are there any other questions?"

"Not at the moment." I picked up my hat.

He said hastily, "Will you have a drink before you leave?"

"I'd like a shot of anisette."

He looked at me queerly. "I have Scotch, rye, bourbon—"

"Sorry."

His hand was on the telephone. "I can order some. There's a liquor store in the lobby. It won't take long."

"Too much trouble," I said. "Thanks just the same. The

fact is, I'm late. I have several calls to make and I want to stop off at the D.A.'s office. I understand he's anxious to see me."

If Lohman had put a squeal on the air, some prowl car cruising this area might be pulling up at the door right now.

In the street, I crossed to the other side and entered a drugstore, watching Strang's building through the window. Several cars drew up and discharged passengers, but I could not distinguish ordinary citizens from city employees. Anyway, as soon as they got the news they would hurry back and prepare a welcome for me at the courthouse.

I had been hoping that my visit to Strang would stir him into action.

It did. Ten minutes later he appeared at the door and flagged a cab. In that vicinity there is never a shortage, and I had no trouble flushing one for myself. The driver got my instructions and took off. It was a tailing job without skill or subtlety, but traffic was heavy enough to keep our purpose obscured.

The ride was brief. Ten blocks north Strang got out and entered a building. I had a moment of deep satisfaction. I knew his destination, because in this building, Benedict Milo had an office.

I remembered the room number from my earlier visit. A creaking elevator took me up, and I paused in front of the door to make a decision on tactics. My first impulse was to break in and surprise them. While I stood there a man's voice, amplified by anger, became audible. Even with the volume up I could not distinguish any words because another voice chimed in, both going at once.

I moved to the end of the corridor and stood in an angle formed by the wall and a structural beam. I smoked a cigarette and waited.

After a moment the door opened and Strang emerged, white with wrath, his lips compressed. It was clear that his interview with Milo had sent a spurt of adrenalin through his veins. I gave him ten minutes and then entered the office.

Benedict Milo was bent over his filing cabinet, examining an envelope. He whirled when I cleared my throat.

Television and the movies have distorted the public's impression of private detectives. The lean rugged type, cryptic in manner, fashionably garbed, uncompromising, analytical, dedicated, may possibly exist. I have never met one who fitted the bill. Any man with those qualifications would hardly waste his time skip-tracing deadbeats and errant husbands. He could find more profitable opportunities in a better line of work.

Milo was a man of average height with a conical build and porcine face. He had the white skin and the silken white hair of an albino. He seemed relieved that Strang had not returned.

"Good morning, sir. Can I help you?"

Two years had passed since he'd testified at McIver's divorce.

"Take a closer look, Milo," I said. "Don't you recognize me?"

He peered closely. "Why, yes, you're Scott Jordan, the lawyer."

"That's right."

"But I thought . . ."

"What did you think?"

He said nothing.

"You thought I was in jail, is that it?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. I read about you in the papers this morning. I knew the D.A. wanted you for questioning. I figured you were being held on the Banton killing."

"They let me go."

His face brightened; his voice became hearty. "You need help. Is that why you're here? If I say so myself, Mr. Jordan, you couldn't have picked a better man. Investigating murder is up my alley. I go all out for my clients. I work night and day, twenty-four hours around the clock. Hardly eat, hardly sleep. Tell me you were framed and I'll believe you. Can I serve you in any way?"

He couldn't serve me a glass of ice-water in the middle of the Sahara desert.

"What are your fees?"

"Depends on the work involved." He looked at me hopefully. "Twenty-five a day?"

"Sounds reasonable."

"Plus expenses."

"Naturally. I was impressed with the way you handled yourself in the McIver case. Do you have a good memory?"

"Excellent."

"Suppose we test it. Will you answer some questions?"

"Anything." The talk of money had sharpened his appetite.

"I understand the district attorney had you on the carpet about the divorce."

Milo grinned. "I was tongue-tied."

"Who hired you originally to check on Mrs. McIver?"

"The lady's husband." He answered without hesitation, as if guile were an alien trait. "Why do you ask?"

"Just trying to keep the record straight. Were there other boy friends or did she concentrate on Banton?"

"The chauffeur had an exclusive."

I didn't call him a liar. But why didn't he mention Nicholas Strang? If he'd been shadowing Claire for any length of time he would have known about the lawyer.

"That day when the raid took place, did you recognize Banton?"

"Sure."

"Who told you to take a picture?"

"Nobody. But I can explain."

"Go ahead."

"I've done a lot of divorce work, counselor, over a hundred cases. You might say I'm a specialist. Sometimes you come up against a referee who's bored with the whole business and hardly pays attention. He signs the papers as a matter of course, without checking. And you probably know that some referees are plenty tough. They take their work seriously. They examine the witnesses themselves. They're suspicious of everybody and sometimes they don't even believe that a raid ever took place. For guys like that a picture comes in handy. It sews up the evidence."

What he said was true enough.

"Why didn't you mention it to McIver?" I asked. "He hired you. He had a right to know."

"I meant to, except that girl, Miss Adams, his secretary, told me not to. She said it would upset him."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I didn't think it was necessary. The case went off without a hitch."

"Where is the picture now?"

"In my file."

"Ever show it to anyone?"

He looked aggrieved. "Of course not. That's confidential material, counselor."

"How did the district attorney get a copy?"

He made a helpless gesture. "Beats me. I checked my file. The picture is still there, so is the negative."

"Who else besides you has access to the file?"

"Nobody."

"Is that what you told Strang?"

"Who?"

"Nicholas Strang, the defendant's lawyer."

"I—I'm afraid I don't understand."

I jabbed a forefinger into his chest. "Then I'll make it clear. I went to see Nicholas Strang and he made a beeline for your office the minute I left him. I know because I followed him here. That means he's worried about something. It also means there's a tie-in between the two of you."

He was silent, thinking hard. Then he smiled, awkwardly.

"I'll be frank with you, Jordan. Strang did come here. He came because you told him about the picture. He was sore as a boil. He demanded the negative. Claimed I had no business perpetuating an indiscretion like that in a photograph."

"Indiscretion?"

"Yes. That's the word he used. He said she probably got tanked and Banton took advantage of the situation and shanghaied her into the hotel."

My appraisal of Milo went up. He had a quick inventive brain.

"Will you do me a favor, Milo?"

"Anything." He was eager to please.

"I'm leaving now. Here's a dime. As soon as I'm gone, use the telephone. Call Strang and tell him I was here. Divulge our conversation and tell him that I think you're a goddam liar."

His mouth was open.

"Another thing. If you were involved in any shenanigans on the McIver divorce I personally will see to it that you lose your license and wind up in jail for perjured testimony." I turned and paused at the door. "Enjoy yourself. It won't be long now."

VIII

I hadn't called the office in twenty-four hours, and since I had spent the night away from home, Cassidy didn't know where to reach me. I found a booth and dialed and said, "Good morning. Your employer."

"Oh! Dr. Bukantz. How do you do."

"Turn up your hearing aid," I said. "This is—"

"No, doctor. I'm terribly sorry. Mr. Jordan is not in the office and I don't know where to reach him."

"Excuse me," I said. "I'm not functioning properly. Company?"

"That's quite right, doctor."

"From the D.A.'s office?"

"Oh, yes."

"Any messages?"

"I believe so, doctor. He left Laura's number for you."

"Go ahead. I have a pencil ready."

"Circle 3–0200."

"Okay. Let's not press our luck."

"One moment, doctor. Where can Mr. Jordan reach you if he calls?"

"Mr. Jordan is a fugitive from justice," I said. "Carry on."

My line might have been tapped and this number traced,

so I walked several blocks to a cigar store and another booth. I dialed the number and got a friendly soprano voice.

"Good morning. Glamor Salon. May I help you?"

"Is Laura there?"

"Laura's busy at the moment. She'll be free in half an hour. Would you like an appointment?"

"If you please."

"And the name?"

"Jordan."

"This is for your wife, I presume. Mrs. Jordan at 11:30. Thank you, sir."

I hung up and checked the directory. The Glamor Salon was on West 57th Street. A taxi might not make it in half an hour, so I took the subway. I speculated on Laura's identity. That Cassidy had omitted her last name gave it significance. It might have alerted Lohman's boys.

The building stood on a valuable piece of real estate, but its earning power had not been utilized in a perpendicular direction. It was two stories high, with a huge window on the second floor and lettering that proclaimed the words: GLAMOR SALON.

It turned out to be a fancy name for a beauty parlor.

There was a hushed atmosphere in the waiting room. Dim lights and tinted mirrors to keep the patrons from seeing themselves as others saw them.

They sat in chairs deployed around the room awaiting their turn, leafing through fashion magazines. They all looked up when I entered and I felt myself being evaluated financially, physically, and matrimonially. The receptionist smiled.

"How do you do," I said. "Is Laura free yet?"

"In about five minutes. Are you the gentleman who phoned?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Her eyes swept the area behind me. "Where is your wife?"

"I haven't any."

"But you made an appointment."

"For conversational purposes only."

She shook her head. "Oh, I'm afraid that's quite out of the question, sir. Our operators are booked solid. We can't permit them to indulge in social activities during business hours. Laura had to leave yesterday afternoon for the day and it threw our whole schedule off. Why don't you come back this evening and Miss Banton can—"

"Who?"

She jumped at the sudden volume in my voice and looked at me anxiously. I forced myself to relax and smile. I regarded her earnestly. "Look, it's imperative that I speak with Miss Banton, but I don't want the salon to lose any money. Let me keep the appointment. I'll take a shampoo."

She was nonplused for a moment. "This is not a barber shop, Mr. Jordan. We cater exclusively to women. The management would be upset if—"

"The management doesn't have to know." I placed a ten-dollar bill on the desk.

"Oh, my!" Transfixed by Hamilton's portrait she began to waver.

A heavy woman waddled over and presented herself at the desk. "That Laura is an artist," she said. "How much do I owe?" She opened an alligator purse. Several hundred minks had lost their lives and their outer garments to make one for the woman.

My ten-dollar bill disappeared and the receptionist capitulated. "Miss Banton is free. Down the corridor to booth number six."

A number of doors were open on both sides, all rooms bus-

ily occupied. Females on the assembly line, being greased, painted, curled, and deodorized. But was the end product any more prepossessing? With chassis styles running to slender lines they should have reduced their fuel intake years ago. It was too late for that now. Framework and superstructure were out of control. Still, the operators sent them forth like new tankers out of drydock, protected against the elements, laminated with pulverized chalk and colored paste.

False representation, I thought. A man has a right to know what he's getting. But it would take a heavy application of paint remover to strip the merchandise down to its hull.

In booth number six, a tall angular girl with cropped auburn hair was bent over a long table rearranging an assortment of cosmetics.

I cleared my throat. "Miss Banton?"

She turned and a frown replaced the mechanical smile.

"You wanted to see me," I said. "The name is Scott Jordan."

"Oh." She moved to close the door, and leaned against it, staring at me.

"You're Steve's sister?" I asked.

She nodded.

The resemblance was unmistakable. The bone structure in her face had come out of the same mold, but its lines were softer. Veins streaked her eyes, indicating a recent irrigation, which was natural under the circumstances, regardless of how she felt about her brother. Death seems to cancel out a lot of past transgressions.

"You're supposed to give me a shampoo," I said, "but we can talk instead. Whatever the charge, I'm willing to pay."

She found a smile somewhere.

"I'm sorry about Steve. I had nothing to do with his death."

She nodded. "I know. Lieutenant Nola told me. I'm not crazy about cops, but that one seems different."

"Did they give you a bad time?"

"Bad enough. I had to identify the body. And they asked me a lot of questions, especially the district attorney." She shuddered distastefully. "He wanted to know all about you and Steve."

"What did you tell him?"

"What *could* I tell him? We didn't live together and Steve never took me into his confidence. And after he came into the chips he almost forgot he had a sister."

"Is there something special you wanted to tell me?"

She was silent, studying me. "Can I ask you a question first?"

"Of course."

"Why did you go to see Steve?"

"He was involved in a case I tried two years ago."

"The McIver divorce?"

I looked at her sharply. "Do you know anything about that?"

"Only what the D.A. said, that you fixed it for Steve to be caught in a hotel room with his boss's wife. That he could have been a witness against you."

"That's not true, Laura."

She nodded and reached for a bottle of skin lotion. She poured some into her palm and began to massage her hands absently.

"We were never too close, Steve and I. But he was the only relative I had. If he'd been sick, or died of old age, or been killed in an automobile accident, maybe I wouldn't feel this way. But he was murdered and I don't want the killer to get away with it. I want him caught and punished."

Her voice was dispassionate, without rancor.

"Maybe Steve did a lot of bad things when he was alive, but nobody had a right to kill him."

"What kind of bad things, Laura?"

She wiped her hands with a piece of tissue. "I suppose I ought to let it rest, him being dead and all, but it won't matter to Steve now, one way or the other. And maybe it'll help to catch his murderer."

Her eyes were remote, reaching into the past. Her fists clenched. "Even as a boy, Steve was a problem. He used to drive Mom crazy, always running around with street gangs, acting tough, and getting into trouble with the cops. Once they caught him stealing some stuff from a junk yard and he spent six months in the reformatory. Later there was some trouble about a girl, but the charges were dismissed. Mom took it pretty hard and I kind of blamed Steve when she died."

She paused, her mouth sour with the bitter taste of self-condemnation, and she rubbed her fingertips across her forehead. "But then he got that job, driving for Vincent McIver, and I thought maybe he had reformed. But I guess I was mistaken."

"Why do you say that?"

"He was killed, wasn't he? Somebody must have a reason. Steve was probably mixed up in something bad." She set her jaw. "Still and all, nobody had a right to kill him, no matter what he did."

"Where do I fit into the picture, Laura?"

"I need some legal advice."

"Well," I said quizzically, "I don't mind handling new business, but why me?"

"Because I don't know any other lawyers. Lieutenant Nola said you were honest. And I checked around with some people I know."

"What do you want done?"

"The cops found a lot of money in Steve's room. About four thousand dollars. In cash. It belongs to me, I guess, and I want to know how I can get it."

"There are no other relatives?"

"Only me."

"Did Steve have a safe deposit box?"

"I doubt it."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because he brought a brief case to my apartment about a month ago and he asked me to keep it for him. 'Hide it,' he said. 'And guard it with your life, baby. That bag is worth a lot of money.'" She straightened her shoulders. "He kept it locked. He didn't even trust his own sister."

"Did you tell the lieutenant about this?"

"No."

"Where is the bag now?"

"In my apartment."

"Did you open it?"

She pulled herself up defensively. "Who had a better right?"

"Don't get me wrong, Laura. I'm not condemning you. I just want to know if the case held anything that might give the police a clue."

She relaxed and wet her lips. "I found two things I guess you ought to see." She opened her purse and brought out a folded slip of paper. "Here's one of them."

I unfolded the paper. It was a promissory note for ten thousand dollars, payable on demand, made out to Steve Banton and signed with the name Hugo Ritter.

I felt my pulse accelerate.

"Do you know this man, Hugo Ritter?"

She shook her head.

"Ever hear your brother mention his name?"

"No."

"This is important evidence, Laura. Ritter owed Steve a lot of money. It may have been a motive for killing him. What's the other thing you wanted me to see?"

"This." She handed me a small manila envelope.

The envelope yielded a small piece of cloth, triangular in shape, of navy-blue velveteen, glittering brightly with black sequins. Its edges were ragged, as if torn from a larger piece of fabric. Part of it was smudged with dirt and grease.

I held it up. "Does it mean anything to you, Laura?"

She shrugged and shook her head.

"Why do you think Steve was saving it?"

"I have no idea."

"Try," I said. "Dig in."

But it was useless. She had no explanation.

So I changed the subject. "The rent at the Wickford Arms is pretty steep. Do you know where Steve got his money, or the ten thousand dollars he loaned this Ritter?"

She lifted her shoulders and dropped them. "Steve always boasted about the big deals he had cooking. I never believed him. I was wrong, I guess."

"Have you been through his apartment yet?"

"Will the police let me?"

"Ask Lieutenant Nola. He's probably finished with it by now. And give him this piece of cloth. Tell him— No, he should have it as soon as possible. I'll send it down by messenger."

"He'll be angry because I didn't tell him myself."

"Yes, but he'll get over it."

"Should I call your office if I find anything in Steve's apartment?"

"You may not be able to reach me. Give me your home address."

She took a pencil out of her purse and wrote it down. She took something else out of her purse, too. Five twenty-dollar bills.

"What's this for?"

"A retainer. I like to pay for everything. And I want you to collect the ten thousand dollars from Hugo Ritter."

"I'll try."

Part of my thirty minutes still remained, but I left. I stopped at the reception desk.

"Excellent shampoo," I said. "How much?"

"Five dollars."

I paid, happy to quit the place. It reminded me of a paint shop where they disguise a rusty automobile with a glittering Duco finish.

IX

I sent the promissory note and the piece of fabric down to Nola's office by Western Union, with an explanation on the back of one of my cards. Nola had the facilities for locating Hugo Ritter and learning more about Steve Banton's recent ventures.

I phoned the district attorney's office and got through to Bill Postilie, Lohman's chief assistant.

"Scott!" He sounded waspish. "Where the devil are you?"

"In a phone booth."

"Here in Manhattan?"

"Yes."

"You must be daft. Our boys are scouring the town."

"I know. I've got to see you, Bill."

"When?"

"Right away."

"You don't care what happens to my job. Where?"

"Murphy's."

There was an adenoidal gasp. "Now I know you've flipped your lid. That's right across the street from our office."

"Just the place nobody would think of looking."

He sighed. "I'm an officer of the law. I shouldn't be hobnobbing with a fugitive from justice. Can you be there in fifteen minutes?"

I told him yes and hung up.

Murphy's was a dim oasis on Foley Square, opposite the courthouse, where lawyers lubricated their vocal cords during recess. The floors were covered with sawdust, but the beer pipes were clean.

Bill Postilie was waiting in the back room, his attenuated figure hunched over a stein of ale, his long face solemnly perpendicular. He looked at me morosely. "I should have my head examined. What are you drinking?"

"Same as you."

"Stay here. I'll get it." A moment later he was back, carrying another stein. "Give me one good reason why I should stick my neck out."

"Class loyalty," I said. "Brotherly love. Alumni tradition. The conviction that I'm innocent. Take your pick."

"I can't figure it," he said wonderingly. "You were such a mild and studious guy at law school. What happened? Where did you get this affinity for trouble?"

"It's a gift."

"And you're welcome to it. Now, what's on your alleged mind?"

"Are you acquainted with the Banton case?"

"Acquainted with it? I'm practically married to it. Lohman assigned me to handle the indictment. I'm going before the grand jury this week. You're practically dead, boy. We've got witnesses, plus motive, plus means, plus opportunity."

"Opportunity, I concede. Maybe even motive. But how do you figure means?"

"Banton was shot."

"Exactly. How about the gun?"

"We found it."

"Where?"

"In your apartment."

"What!" I catapulted to my feet, goggling at him.

He nodded soberly. "When you didn't sleep home last night, Lohman got doubly suspicious. He applied for a warrant and had your apartment searched. They found the gun at the bottom of your laundry hamper, hidden under some shirts."

I reached across the table and gripped his lapel. My throat was dry as ashes. "What kind of gun?"

"German pocket automatic, manufactured by J. P. Sauer, caliber .32, unregistered."

"It's not mine, Bill."

"Naturally." No intonation in his voice.

"Are you sure it's the murder weapon?"

"Positive. Ballistics checked it against the slug that finished Banton. They match perfectly."

"Sweet Jesus!" I breathed. "They're drawing the noose tighter every minute. I didn't kill Banton, you know that, Bill."

"Let go the lapel. This is a new suit."

"It's a frame, Bill. Planting that gun is all part of the same caper."

"Can you convince a jury?"

"It mustn't go to a jury. We've got to stop it first. What other evidence have you got?"

"Just a minute, Scott. I work for the People of New York. What do you think they pay me for?"

"They don't pay you to railroad an innocent man."

"You have a point. Ask specific questions."

I sat down again. "Look, Bill, this whole thing came to a head when Lohman got that snapshot. Who sent it?"

"We don't know. It was delivered by a messenger service,

with a typewritten note, unsigned, explaining its significance."

"Weren't they questioned?"

"Yes. But they had no information. Somebody brought it to their office, paid the fee, got a receipt, and walked out."

"Male or female."

"Male. That much they remembered."

"What messenger service?"

He thought a moment, then brightened. "Arrow. The name was stamped on the envelope, framed by a long green arrow." He paused because I was on my feet, moving.

"Thanks, Bill. If I clear myself on this I'll send you a case of Scotch."

"And if you fail?"

"I'll leave you my office furniture. It may come in handy if you decide to break away from Lohman."

It was colder, the sky murky and overcast. I had no trouble locating the Arrow Messenger Service. A small office, containing only bare essentials, a hardwood bench supporting two youths, and a stenographer behind a desk with three telephones. She looked up as I approached.

"I'd like some information," I said.

"Certainly. Our minimum rate is one dollar in the metropolitan area and if you want the boy to take a cab it will cost—"

I broke in. "I'm sorry. What I'd like is some information about one of your customers."

Her smile faded. "I'm sorry too. We never divulge confidential information."

Apparently she fancied herself in the same position as a priest or a lawyer. I exerted charm, flashing a manly smile.

"Nothing confidential about this. All I want is a descrip-

tion of a man who left an envelope here earlier this week to be delivered to the district attorney's office."

She seemed more respectful. "Are you from the police?"

"I'm investigating the case."

"We've been questioned already."

"I understand. All I want is a description."

She was tapping a thumbnail against her teeth, recallingly. "Not many people come here. I'm trying to think . . ."

I knew what would refresh her recollection. It came out of my wallet. She fielded the bill as expertly as Willy Mays, and pegged it behind the neckline of her dress. She pretended to think some more and then smiled brightly.

"Yes. I remember the man. He was rather large, with a heavy face, and he kept his mouth puckered as if he had to kiss someone he didn't like."

The description rang a bell.

"How was he dressed?"

"In a gray tweed coat with a velvet collar, and one of those foreign hats."

That clinched it. Arnold Parish. The husband of Amy Van Dorn's niece. My investment had brought a boom dividend. I almost gave her a bonus, but I swallowed the impulse and gave her a smile instead. The boys on the bench regarded me incuriously as I walked past them.

Arnold Parish. A new wrinkle entirely. I walked along the street, oblivious to traffic, questions gnawing at my brain. How did Parish know about the picture? Who told him? Where did he get a print? And why did he send it anonymously to the D.A.? What was the man after?

An interview was clearly indicated. But Parish wanted to stay in the background. That was obvious. So I couldn't expect him to open up and talk frankly.

I decided to improvise when the time came.

X

According to the law of averages I was about due for a break, and this time I got one, although I did not at the moment realize its significance. I had just checked the number of Parish's office on the directory and was turning toward the elevators when a door slid open and there he was, emerging. He was in a hurry, headed for the street.

I followed.

He did not see me and I kept a discreet distance to the rear. He did not go far. Less than two blocks away he swung into a bar. I gave him a few minutes to get settled and then glanced through the window. Parish was not in sight. He had probably got himself installed in one of the booths that lined the wall.

I entered and perched on a bar stool. The place was humming with activity. Regardless of the hour or the temperature, it seems that a large number of citizens continuously suffers from parched throats. In order to accommodate this drought the city has spawned a thousand watering holes that serve no water. This one was indistinguishable from its cousins.

I ordered Canadian ale and got a glass of Milwaukee stout.

I looked through the mirror, checking the booths. Parish

was almost directly opposite, visible in profile, his heavy jowls vibrating as he spoke. He was leaning forward, delivering an earnest monologue and my eyes widened at the sight of his audience.

Whatever his wife, Irene, lacked, this girl owned in abundance. Most of her assets were disconcertingly crowded into a simple cocktail dress. Its design or color are not important; nobody would notice them anyway. Her hair was a molten flame and she had knowing eyes and a capricious mouth. Her full attention was focused on Parish's words.

All right, I thought, if Arnold Parish wants to indulge in a little extracurricular homework, it's no skin off my nose. The automobile companies are constantly waging a multi-million-dollar advertising campaign that inveigles men into buying a nice new shiny car every year. Under such conditioning, their desires may carry over to new models in other fields.

Was it business? Did a cocktail break in the afternoon with a stimulating, palpitating companion improve his ability to analyze the intricacies of corporate finance? I don't know.

None of which was very enlightening. What I needed was information about the picture and where he got it. I thought of eavesdropping on his conversation, but the booths on either side were occupied. So I changed my plan. The picture had come from Milo's office. I had to devise some method of loosening his tongue.

Averting my face, I abandoned the bar.

The sky was clearing slightly and a faint chill was in the air. I thought of all the loose ends and tried to pull them together, but they had a tendency to fly off in all directions at once. My brain rebelled under the pressure. And that wasn't the only part of me with a complaint. My stomach

had its own lament. No food to work on since breakfast, and without fuel the engine might stall.

There was a sign across the street—Walt's Chop House. The mere thought of a steak caused excessive salivation. I crossed over and deposited myself at a table.

"Sirloin," I told the waiter, "baked Idaho, chef's salad. Put it close to the fire. I'm in a hurry."

It came to me, charred on top and pink in the center, and I wasted no time, striking sparks from the knife and fork. Two cups of black coffee made me feel more human.

The waiter brought a check. I gave him a twenty-dollar bill and sat back, loosening my belt. The process of digestion seemed to drain most of the blood from my head, precluding cerebration. I felt sleepy and roused myself with an effort. Everything came to me in a double vision and I thought of buying some Benzedrine. Instead I lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. This was no time for fatigue. A large slice of my forty-eight hours grace had vanished.

I stirred uneasily. Where was the waiter with my change? What took him so long? I rubbed out the cigarette and started to rise and at that moment two men loomed over the table.

One was the manager, carrying an armful of menus. The other was a cop, carrying a night stick. His uniform was too new to have acquired a shine. It covered a lean and buoyant body, topped off by a young determined face. He pointed the night stick in my direction.

"This the man?"

"That's him." The manager nodded excitedly.

"We'd like to ask you some questions, mister."

"Please," the manager said. "Not here. In my office."

I started to remonstrate. "Wait a minute. What's this all about?"

"Just come along." The cop took a firm grip on his night stick. "Don't start any trouble, mister."

I had been expecting something like this, I suppose. Even in a city the size of New York, with its teeming and preoccupied millions, somebody was bound to recognize me sooner or later. After all, the morning papers had carried my picture.

No more fatigue. My brain was suddenly activated, racing ahead of the event, searching for a loophole. None appeared. The escape hatch was closed, battened down by an ambitious young cop with a dream of promotion in his eyes.

The manager watched me anxiously. Nobody knows what a desperate criminal will do when cornered. This was an eating place, and any kind of excitement would spoil his customers' appetites. He was relieved when I stood up meekly.

We filed to the rear and went through a door to the manager's office. A rolltop desk was piled high with invoices. The cop faced me, holding up a twenty-dollar bill.

"This your money?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know. You gave it to the waiter."

"If it's the same bill, it must be mine."

"Where did you get it?"

"From a client."

"Client?"

"Yes, I'm a lawyer."

The instant the word left my tongue I realized I'd made a mistake. Nobody had recognized me. The trouble here was something else. But with half the force on the lookout, there was no point in identifying myself further. The manager began to look nervous.

"What's your name?" demanded the cop.

I improvised quickly. "Einhorn—Bernard Einhorn." At least it had the ring of a lawyer's name.

"Got any identification?"

I swallowed. One look at my papers and I was finished.

"One minute, officer." I pulled myself up indignantly. "Suppose you tell me what this is all about."

His hand came toward me, palm up. "Let's see your wallet."

"No, sir." I kept my fingers crossed. "Not until I know the nature of the complaint. As a citizen I'm entitled to a certain privacy. If I've done something wrong, then take me in and book me." I turned and stared hard at the manager. "Only be mighty careful you don't expose yourself to a suit for false arrest."

The manager winced. "That twenty-dollar bill you gave us is a counterfeit."

I stood very still. Then I looked at the cop. "May I see the bill?"

"No." He was adamant, pulling his hand back as if he feared I might grab the evidence and swallow it.

"How do you know the bill is counterfeit?"

There was moisture on the manager's forehead. "I used to work in a bank. The printing looks okay, but the texture of the paper is off. And that isn't all. The serial number is a giveaway. We've been warned by the Treasury Department to watch for bills in this series. A number of them have been appearing around town, several in this area."

I said reasonably, "All right, but you can't accuse me of trying to palm it off. I took the bill in good faith. I had no idea it was queer. If you say it's bad, okay, tear it up, and I'll give you another one." I took out my wallet.

Even the cop was beginning to look a bit dubious. "You say you're a lawyer."

"Yes."

"Let's see one of your cards."

I opened the wallet and pretended to search. "Can't seem to find one."

He was craning his neck, eyes peering. "I see some more twenties in there. Pass them over."

There was no way out. He took the bills and relayed them to the manager. "How do these look?"

The manager fingered the bills expertly. He riffled them and listened to the sound. He held one against the light, squinting at it closely. I saw his mouth grow small and prim. "They're bad. All of them. I can almost smell the ink."

My heart stalled. These were the twenties Laura Banton had given me. Had she done so deliberately? Was she unconvinced about my innocence in her brother's death?

The cop clicked his jaw. "That does it. I'll have to take you in, mister."

I felt a moment of panic. If he put the collar on me now, the masquerade would collapse. I'd be forced to identify myself and Lohman would be notified and a cell door would clank shut behind me.

I said, on a rising note of desperation, "Listen, everybody knows that a pusher of counterfeit money never carries more than one bill at a time, precisely because of emergencies like this. And if he does, he keeps them hidden, not in his wallet, where they'd be found at the first sign of trouble."

"Maybe you didn't expect to get caught," the cop said. He reached under his tunic and brought out a pair of handcuffs.

"Are those necessary?"

"I'm not taking any chances. How do I know you're a lawyer? I never saw one who didn't carry a pocketful of cards."

"But look, officer—"

"Ring off, mister. You got an explanation, make it to the sergeant."

I threw in my last card. "He hasn't even got jurisdiction. This is a federal offense."

He eyed me scornfully. "Do I look green, mister? Stick your hands out."

XI

For ten minutes the Rt. Hon. Phillip Lohman had been reading the riot act in a blistering voice. Near the window Bill Postilie stood expressionless while the harangue grew more abrasive.

"What kind of a lawyer are you, Jordan? No. Don't bother to answer. I'll tell you." His palm struck the desk. "You knew we wanted you for questioning. It was in the newspapers; it was on the radio. You should have come in of your own accord. You elected instead to obstruct justice, to suppress evidence, to elude the law—"

"I stayed right here in Manhattan."

"But not in your apartment. I had men covering the place all night. You did not go home. And you deliberately stayed away from your office. If that isn't obstructing justice—"

"I was helping justice."

"Helping?" Sarcasm accompanied the extravagant arch of his eyebrows.

"Yes, sir. By trying to solve this case. By—"

"Please." He threw his hands up. "Are you smarter than the New York City Police Department? Are you more efficient than a staff of trained investigators?"

"No, sir. But I happen to be involved. It's my neck that's at stake. You were preparing to indict me. That means you

were satisfied with my guilt. Under the circumstances I didn't think you'd bother to look elsewhere."

"How about the police? Were they satisfied, too?"

"All the evidence seemed to point in my direction."

"Ah, so you admit that, do you?"

"Yes."

"Then your good friend Lieutenant Nola is guilty of malfeasance in office. He aided and abetted a wanted man to escape."

"That's not true."

"Isn't it? If you looked guilty, then his duty was clear and inescapable. But he turned his back and let you walk out of his office. I intend to see that he's held strictly accountable for that piece of business."

"The lieutenant never thought I was guilty. He believes me innocent."

"Does he? In the face of what practically amounts to conclusive evidence?"

"All of it circumstantial."

"A .32-caliber handarm is hardly circumstantial, especially when it's found in your apartment and happens to be the murder weapon. Men have been convicted on a lot less."

"The lieutenant was aware of that. It probably influenced his decision."

"The decision was not his to make."

"He's known me a long time and he thought it was."

"We'll let the commissioner decide that."

The outlook was bleak. I had sold John Nola a bill of goods and I felt responsible. If the brass clamped down it was my fault. What made Lohman so vengeful? I wondered. What ailed the man anyway? Poor digestion? Incipient ulcers? A dominating wife?

I said, "Don't take your frustrations out on the lieutenant.

The department is lucky to have a man like Nola on its roster. Aren't you satisfied with me? Isn't one victim enough?"

He smiled acidly. He pulled open a drawer, found a tissue, wiped his glasses, and clamped them back on his nose. Then he turned to Postilie with quiet deliberation.

"All right, Bill. Prepare your case for the grand jury tomorrow morning. Everything else takes a back seat. We want an indictment against Jordan for murder one. Subpoena all witnesses, the hotel clerk, the woman in the corridor, the switchboard operator, the detective who found the murder weapon. That should do it."

He switched back to me with a sardonic twist on his mouth. "Saves you a job, doesn't it, Jordan? There's our case. You won't have to inspect the grand jury minutes. So far as motive is concerned, we can prove that in court. I doubt if—"

The intercom buzzed and he flipped a switch. The mechanical voice said, "Mr. Kilbourne is here."

"Send him in."

I recognized Peter Kilbourne the moment he entered the room. Kilbourne was an agent for the Treasury Department. We had worked together in the Mathew Tallant case, when I stumbled over a tax fraud and was able to give him an important lead. He looked like a rising young businessman on his way up the ladder into the executive suite. His face was scrubbed, his hair cropped. He moved briskly, his alert eyes encompassing the room in one quick circular sweep. When he advanced to shake my hand, Lohman could not resist a comment.

"Strange companions the government keeps."

"Matter of policy," Kilbourne said easily. "Jordan saved us a lot of money last year." He raised a quizzical eyebrow in

my direction. "What gives, counselor? Not enough money in the law? I hear you have a new sideline, pushing phony twenty-dollar bills." He looked around. "Who has them?"

"Right here," Lohman said, pushing them across his desk. "Jordan claims he got them from a client and he refuses to elucidate. Privileged communication—*he thinks.*"

Kilbourne examined the twenties with a clinical eye. "Yep." He nodded. "Same lot that's been flooding this area for several months." He winced. "And what a headache! That engraver must have been trained by the mint. Best specimens we've seen in years." He paused, eyes straight at me, the line of his mouth grim and sober. "We've been stymied, Jordan, blocked at every turn. You're the first decent break we've had. What's the story?"

"I got them from a client."

"You see?" Lohman said.

"For what purpose?" Kilbourne ignored the comment.

"Part of a fee."

"And the client's name?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "But I'd like to discuss it with him first." I did not bother to enlighten Kilbourne about Laura Banton's sex.

He stretched his eyes, incredulous. "Are you serious? A thing like this is vital. It can't be delayed. Those boys are printing and distributing that paper on a full-time schedule." He tried an appeal to my patriotism. "Good Lord, Jordan, do you want to be responsible for debasing the currency of the United States beyond recognition?"

I said nothing.

He wiped his right palm along his trouser seam, as if he were trying to erase my handshake.

Lohman seemed half-amused. "Don't waste time trying to reason with Jordan. He's not a reasonable man."

Kilbourne clamped his jaw. "Then I'm taking him into custody. Possession and passing of counterfeit money."

"After us, my friend. The State of New York has a prior claim. We're holding him on a charge of first-degree homicide. You can have him when we're finished—if there's anything left."

I said, "Don't fight over me, boys. This is no time for a jurisdictional dispute."

Kilbourne regarded me, his features narrowed into a set expression. "Do I understand you correctly, Jordan? You absolutely refuse to co-operate with the government, is that it?"

"Not at all. Just give me a chance to find out more about it. I promise I'll have some information for you by tonight."

"Don't believe him," Lohman said. "He'll be in a cell and we haven't installed telephones there yet."

"You know where I can be reached?" Kilbourne asked me.

"Yes."

"I'll be waiting." He was starved for information, but he didn't want to crowd me. He shoved the counterfeit bills into his pocket. "These belong to the government."

When he left, Lohman spoke to the intercom and a city detective poked his head through the door. "We're finished with Jordan. See that he's properly booked and held on suspicion of homicide."

I said, "I'm entitled to make one phone call, am I not?"

"After you're booked."

It took thirty minutes to complete the formalities and get my hands on a telephone. I called the office. No answer; Cassidy had already left. I dialed her apartment. No answer there either. I tried Hazel and got a cheery voice after a single ring.

"Ace Typing Service."

"Hazel, this is—"

"Scott! Where have you been all day? I tried to reach you at the office, but your secretary didn't know where you were. Will you be staying at my place tonight?"

"I don't think so. Look, Hazel—"

"You can come for dinner anyway. I've already made the preparations. Braised oxtails and kidney brochettes, two of my specialties, for a hungry fugitive." Her voice turned wistful. "And Scott, I was thinking about that terribly uncomfortable sofa in the living room. It seems a shame with such a nice big bed and me so small—"

I cut her short. "Behave yourself and listen to me."

She caught the urgency in my voice and subsided instantly. "What is it, Scott?"

"I need your help."

"Of course."

"I want you to get in touch with Mr. Oliver Wendell Rogers and—"

"Your old boss?"

"That's right. He's retired now and he lives at Fifteen Park. Go to see him personally. He's probably read about the spot I'm in. Tell him they booked me on suspicion of homicide. I want to see him as soon as possible. Then call my secretary. Tell her to get in touch with Mr. Rogers. He'll need her to draw some papers. Have you got that?"

"Yes." She was very businesslike.

"Repeat it."

She did so, verbatim.

"Good girl. If Rogers isn't home, find him. Turn the town upside down. Am I clear?"

"Very."

"Okay. Get rolling."

She hung up and I hung up and a cop took my arm and escorted me upstairs and delivered me to a turnkey.

XII

Usually a lawyer is on the outside looking in, listening to the agitated protestations of a distraught client, trying to separate fact from fiction. Now the tables were reversed. I was on the inside looking out, glum and dejected.

The inside of a cell is no place for a lawyer.

I didn't like it one little bit. A whole cabal of plotters, it seemed, had been working overtime to tighten the case against me. I sat alone on the edge of the cot, jittery and perspiring. I felt small and insignificant, like a crippled ant watching the inexorable approach of a steam-roller. The vast machinery of organized society, relentless and impersonal, was beginning to roll in my direction.

Waning light came through a high small window and the pattern of bars threw a slanted shadow across the wall. I stretched out horizontally, with my hands under my head. This couldn't happen, not to me. It seemed like a nightmare. But it had happened, and here I was, boxed up, caught in a beautiful frame.

And all because I had handled a simple divorce action two years ago.

I closed my eyes and thought about it. What had really started this disastrous chain of events? Was it the divorce? Had there actually been collusion?

I felt certain there had been. It helped explain Strang's visit to Benedict Milo. He was worried and trying to clear his skirts. He had been Claire's lawyer. And her boy friend.

Claire, apparently, had decided on a divorce. When she broke the news to McIver, he agreed. He told her to go ahead, providing she took the rap. Which meant that Strang was called upon to make all the arrangements.

He had recommended a private detective to McIver. He had arranged for Banton and Claire to be found in a hotel room. Then, with the evidence complete, he had suggested that McIver retain counsel, someone of his own choosing. Thus bringing me into the case.

Nobody was willing to admit the collusion. Least of all, Vincent McIver. The divorce might be set aside, and he wanted to protect Amy Van Dorn. Neither Strang nor Milo would talk. Strang could be disciplined by the Bar Association, and Milo might lose his license.

None of this would have come to light, had Milo not taken that picture. Which made me think of Arnold Parish, and wonder again where he got the print.

My head began to throb. Too many enigmas. And how could they be solved from a horizontal position in a locked cell? *Ritter, Ritter, Ritter.* The name kept pulsing like a neon bulb. Hugo Ritter, who'd given Steve Banton an I.O.U. for ten thousand dollars. The thought of money reminded me of Laura's counterfeit twenties, and I pushed upright and began to pace around the cell.

I took hold of the bars and squeezed them. Caged! Like an animal in the zoo. But an animal cannot think. He's satisfied if they feed him. He doesn't fret and stew over the circumstances that put him there, or worry about the future. In my case, somebody had gone to a lot of trouble to get me out of the way. I ran an exasperated hand through my hair.

But why? What did I know? Whose safety did I threaten?

Footsteps echoed along the corridor. A guard peered in and said, "Visitor." He turned a key. "This way."

A tall man sat waiting for me in the counsel room. Tall, with beetling brows on a protruding forehead, and white fringe around his ears. He had a curved nose and two sets of false teeth. His jaws had contracted since the teeth were made and they clicked when he spoke. He was seventy years old, with springy joints, and the rose-high complexion of a dedicated brandy drinker. He wore no glasses and needed none; his eyes were a startling blue, direct and penetrating. His palm, when he offered it, was dry and brittle.

He faced me with a wide porcelain grin. "Well, well, my boy, I've been reading about you. You certainly have the gift. I trust you haven't stepped in over your head this time. Sit down and tell me about it."

Oliver Wendell Rogers, a legal beagle in the old tradition, the first and only man to give me a job when I got out of law school. His intuitive grasp of complex problems was invariably nimble-witted and acute. Ultimate justice, he always believed, deserved precedence over a strict interpretation of the rules. I entered his office callow and green. My mistakes were seldom overlooked and never condoned.

"A doctor," he used to tell me, "can afford to make no errors. Neither, my boy, can a lawyer. Your clients entrust you with the fruits of their toil and perhaps their freedom. Attack fiercely and defend passionately."

He sat motionless, listening to me talk. When I finished he leaned back and pinched his bottom lip reflectively.

"Fantastic," he muttered.

"It's the truth, every word."

"Criminal law was never my forte, Scott. What do you want me to do?"

"Get me out of here."

He raised a quizzical eyebrow. "You mean help you escape?"

"Of course not. Legally."

He shook his head. "A writ of habeas corpus would never hold water, not with all that evidence against you."

"I know. Get me out on bail."

"Well, now, I'm rusty on the rules, boy, but I know this much, the accused has no right to demand bail in a homicide case."

"That's my point," I said. "I admit I have no right to demand it. On the other hand, a judge may grant me bail, if he wishes, in his discretion, under unusual circumstances."

"So? And just what are the unusual circumstances?"

"The fact that I'm innocent."

"I see. Won't you have to prove that in a court of law?"

"No, sir. I don't have to prove anything of the kind. *They* have to prove I'm guilty."

A faint smile on his mouth as he ducked his head. "Quite true. I beg your pardon."

"My job," I said, "is to fight back. I can't do that, sitting here in the jug, twiddling my thumbs. I've got to move around, talk to people, dig up facts. I want out and you can help me."

"How?"

"Have you seen your brother-in-law lately?"

"Now wait a minute." His hand was up, traffic-cop fashion. "You don't expect me to—"

"Yes, I do. Felix Cobb is your wife's brother. He's a Justice of the Court of General Sessions. How do you think he got elected? It took—"

"Cobb," Oliver declared loftily, "is a topnotch jurist."

"Did I say no? He is also a politician. How many speeches

did I make when he ran for office? How many street corners did I stand on, extolling him to the citizens? And not because I expected favors, or wanted any. Felix is the kind of man who belongs on the bench. I genuinely felt that. All I've had in this case is bad luck. I'm entitled to one good break. There's nothing dishonest or unethical about it. The judge is in a position to help me and I want you to ask him."

"What if he refuses?"

"That's his privilege, of course. But what's the good of knowing someone with influence if you can't ask him for a favor?"

"The newspapers would pillory him."

"Not Cobb. Not a man of his reputation and integrity."

"You're asking too much, Scott."

"You don't really believe that. Besides, he'll owe it to me for future services. He likes being a judge and he'll want to run for another term. I'll court laryngitis, Oliver. I'll eulogize him from here to—"

"Those are not obligations Felix would recognize."

"Then he'll recognize his own conscience. He met me in your home half a dozen times. He knows me. He knows what I stand for. He knows I'm innocent."

"He knows nothing of the kind. That's for a court and jury to decide."

"Oh, sure," I said bitterly. "Take a dyspeptic judge, a firebrand prosecutor, and an impressionable jury. Mix well and sprinkle with circumstantial evidence. That way I can get my head shaved up at Sing Sing. A nice picture, isn't it, Oliver? How would you like to go to sleep with it every night?"

He looked out across the far end of the room. He rubbed his forehead slowly, trying to erase the creases.

I said, "I've got to get out of here. Tonight. You know

Lohman. He might put me in the morning line-up, just for laughs. Scott Jordan, attorney-at-law. Passing counterfeit money. Suspicion of homicide. Dark hair, brown eyes, five feet eleven, bullet scar on left buttock, memento of World War II. Turn sideways, please. Note the profile, gentlemen. That's all. Step down." I leaned forward intently. "Fine publicity, isn't it, Oliver? For five years I've been building and now they're rocking the foundation. A lawyer is supposed to be dignified, beyond reproach. Remember those words? You ought to. You told them to me. What do you think will happen to my practice?"

He grimaced like a man swallowing a needle.

"All right, Scott. What's the procedure?"

"Simple. Cassidy will draw the papers, an application to fix bail. I've put her on notice and she'll be in touch with you. There's only one hitch. Somebody from the D.A.'s office has to be present, even if the hearing takes place in the judge's apartment. Tell her to serve William Postilie. There's a good chance he'll make only a token protest."

A transformation came over Oliver Wendell Rogers. Age had forced him into retirement, but he resented the stagnation. Suddenly he was enthusiastic. I saw the gleam of battle in his eyes.

"One more thing," I told him. "Cobb doesn't have to set bail. I'm a lawyer. He can parole me in your custody. Or in my own custody."

Oliver was on his feet now, spry, anxious to get moving. "I'll rout Felix out of bed, if necessary. Where's that guard? Let's shake a leg here."

I borrowed half a dollar before he left. My own money had been checked by the property clerk. When I got back to my cell I offered it to the turnkey.

"If that's a bribe," he said, "it won't buy much."

"Will it buy a newspaper?"

"You can have mine. And keep your money." He grinned toothily. "You may need it to hire a good lawyer."

The paper was a tabloid, which suited me fine. National and foreign news had been neglected in favor of sex and crime. The age of the common man, and a paper with two and a half million circulation. Unrest in North Africa, a revolution in South America, and the front page gave us a cheesecake shot of a Turkish dancer.

On page three, brief mention of my arrest. Nothing about the counterfeit bills or Uncle Sam's involvement. Peter Kilbourne, apparently, had clamped a lid over it. They gave the murder angle a play, however, being careful to allege only, and say nothing flatly. Yet my guilt seemed implicit between the lines.

The cell plunged suddenly into darkness as someone pulled a master switch. I groped my way to the cot and stretched out. A dim light burned in the corridor and moonglow filtered through the window. I squeezed my eyelids shut, but sleep eluded me, although I was saturated with weariness. Nervousness prowled my stomach like an undigested pizza pie. After a while I managed to doze.

Someone called my name. I opened my eyes and a face materialized in the gloom. "All right, Jordan. On your feet. You can go home now."

Oliver Wendell Rogers was waiting for me at the desk. A triumphant grin spread across his dentures as he waved a paper. "Got it, boy."

"Any trouble?"

"Very little. Felix came through like a major. And Cassidy broke a fingernail hammering out those papers. Your friend Postilie raised quite a storm, but it was mostly double-talk, for the record only; his heart wasn't in it."

"How much bail?"

"I wanted him to release you on your own recognizance, but he threw Postilie a bone and made it high. Fifty thousand."

I whistled. "Holy smoke! Who posted it?"

"Cassidy found a bondsman."

"On what security?"

He averted his eyes, looking faintly embarrassed. "That building I own in Queens."

For a moment I had no words. My throat was clogged. I said simply, "Thanks, Oliver. You won't be sorry. I can't—"

His tone was gruff, cutting me short. "Forget it. Just don't jump bail. I don't want to be on the relief rolls. Now let's get out of here."

The property clerk returned my wallet, keys, penknife, and silver. On the street I stood with my head tilted, and I filled my lungs with ten cubic feet of Manhattan air gorgeously spiced with exhaust fumes and chimney soot.

Oliver was stimulated, full of vinegar. "This calls for a celebration, Scott, my boy. A libation of spirits. Let us repair to some good inn and—"

"At this hour, Oliver? With your ulcers? I'm afraid your wife would tack my skin to the wall if I sent you home plastered. Besides, I have work to do."

"May I come along?"

"Not tonight," I told him reluctantly.

He was disappointed. "As you wish." I signaled a passing cab and he climbed aboard. He spoke through the window. "Keep your nose clean, boy. And don't leave the state. Just remember, I went surety on your bond."

XIII

Laura Banton lived in a four-story walkup, a converted brownstone dwarfed between towering skyscrapers as modern as tomorrow.

Women have no monopoly on changing styles. Cities, too, are susceptible. The modish apartments along Riverside had lost their fashionable appeal and builders were placing their bets on the east side. Luxury-class structures were rising along Manhattan's edge, concrete and glass bastions, with terraces commanding a view of the East River, where the upper brackets could wash down their caviar with alcohol while peering across at the prison walls on Governor's Island.

Laura's building served to magnify the opulence of its neighbors. I hoped she was sleeping. It takes time for the brain to emerge from slumber and begin to function. By awakening her suddenly I might get a closer approximation to the truth.

The halls were silent. No radios blaring, no carousing. The tenants here worked for a living and needed their rest. I stood in front of Laura's door, thinking how quickly the government would revoke my freedom unless I had an explanation for Peter Kilbourne about those counterfeit bills. I was reaching out to push the button when I heard a curious sound.

Low, whimpering, the cry of a small puppy lost in an alley. It lifted the hair along the back of my neck. I turned my ear, straining. I heard a broken sob, trailing the end of a ragged breath. The sound, I knew, was human, and it came from inside the door.

I rang.

Silence. No sound now at all. I rang again, holding my finger on the button. Still no response. I hit the door with my knuckles.

"Open up, Laura."

A voice, barely audible and pleading, came through. "Go away . . . please go away."

"It's me, Laura. Scott Jordan."

"Oh." Marked relief in her voice, and a pause. Then, "I —I can't see you now."

"You've got to see me, Laura. This won't wait. It's urgent. Do you want me to wake the whole building?"

"Please . . ."

I rattled the doorknob. "Open up. I heard you crying. Are you in trouble?"

Another pause, the sound of a safety chain being disengaged, the sound of a bolt sliding back. I opened the door, stepped inside, and kicked it shut.

Laura Banton was wearing a cotton housecoat and mules trimmed with rabbit's fur. A standing lamp with a fringed shade barely illuminated the room. Under the dim light I could not see her face. She kept it averted, her narrow shoulders hunched together.

The room was a shambles. A chest of drawers gaped open, contents scattered. A chair lay on its back, upholstery torn. Pictures had been taken from the walls, their backing removed. It looked as if a tornado had ripped briefly through the room and blown itself out in Laura's eyes.

I saw that when I took her arm and turned her toward me. She, too, had been worked over. A livid welt stood out along her right temple. Her left cheek was swollen and bruised. A dollop of congealed blood hung against the corner of her mouth. Fear lurked behind her red-veined eyes, which were streaked with moisture.

She broke loose and headed for the bathroom. I heard water gurgling from a tap. When she came back she had washed away the tears, but not the bruises. I lit a cigarette in silence and handed it to her. She inhaled hungrily, hugging the housecoat tightly, as if she were cold.

I surveyed the carnage. "No lovers' quarrel here," I said. "Who did it, Laura?"

"I—I don't know."

I tried to keep my voice down, but it came out in a growl. "Dammit, Laura! Listen to me. This is no time to play charades. All hell is breaking loose, with you, with me, with everybody. Your brother is dead and—"

"Please . . . You don't understand. The man was here when I came home. He'd broken into the apartment and was searching for something. I had never seen him before and I didn't recognize him."

"What did he want?"

"That note for ten thousand dollars. The I.O.U. He said it was his."

"Hugo Ritter?"

"He didn't tell me his name."

"What made him think you had it?"

"Something he'd heard. That Steve had left some things with me and I had sent them down to Lieutenant Nola. He said he had a friend in headquarters."

So there was a leak in John's office. "What happened?"

Her mouth trembled. "I—I told him about that piece of

cloth, but he wasn't interested. He said I was holding out on him. He demanded to see everything that Steve had left with me."

"He didn't specify?"

She shook her head.

"You'd better tell me, Laura. You can't handle this alone. You're playing way out of your league. Steve was mixed up in bad company and look what happened to him. And take a look at yourself, too. This goon means business. If you want my help you'd better come clean. Otherwise you're on your own and God knows where it will end. Next time he may go all the way."

Fear crowded into her face, draining it. She drew away, some other emotion holding her in check. Greed? I wondered.

"You're worried about the money, aren't you, Laura?"

Her eyes jumped up, startled. "Who—who told you. How do you—" She swallowed the rest of it, clapping a hand across her lips.

"Steve left some money with you, didn't he?"

No comment. She watched me warily.

"In a way, you're lucky," I said. "Lucky you didn't try to spend it. The money is no good."

"I—I don't know what you mean."

"It's counterfeit." I saw her face collapse with disappointment. "Those bills you gave me were part of the lot. The serial number was recognized by a restaurant cashier and they called a cop. It's out of my hands now. The Treasury Department and the Secret Service are involved. I protected you. I kept you out of it. The least you can do is tell me the truth."

She kept twisting a handkerchief between her fingers. Her shoulders sagged. After a moment she said, her voice dull

and lifeless, "Yes. The money was in Steve's brief case, with those other things. I found it there."

"How much?"

"Two thousand dollars."

"All in twenties?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you mention it?"

She shrugged wearily, a faint spark in her voice. "Why should I? I didn't know it was counterfeit. Steve was my brother, and he left it with me. I felt it was mine."

"Where is it now?"

"In a safe place."

"Get it for me."

She started an objection, decided against it, and went to the bedroom. She was back in a moment with a brown paper bag and proffered it. I looked inside and saw the neat bundle of twenty-dollar bills, artificially handled to make it seem as if they had been in circulation.

"Tell me about Hugo Ritter," I said.

"I don't know if that's his name."

"It's the name of the man who signed the I.O.U. What did he look like?"

She shivered. "He was big, and very fat, with a coarse face. I—I think he enjoyed hitting me." Her chin went out of control, but she caught herself. "He was cruel . . . and gross."

I allowed a deep silence to grow between us. Then I said earnestly, "One thing more, Laura. This money is valueless. It won't buy a thing. Nevertheless we can't just toss the bag down the incinerator and forget all about it. I told you I was arrested. But I did not tell anyone where I got my samples. I wanted to hear your explanation first. They're still waiting for one from me. I want you to tell them."

Her fingers formed a quick bowknot of distress at her throat. "Will I get into trouble?"

"I doubt it. As a matter of fact the local authorities have no jurisdiction. This is a job for the federal government and you'll be notifying them as soon as you learned the truth."

She nodded slowly. "All right, if you say I have to."

"Where's your telephone?"

"In the bedroom."

I knew that Kilbourne was waiting for my call. The night operator told me where to reach him and I got through almost at once.

"Pete? Scott Jordan. Here's an address." I gave it to him. "If you come right over you can have more of that counterfeit money and an explanation."

"Fifteen minutes," he said. "Wait there."

"Can you bring a fingerprint outfit?"

He asked no questions. "Yes. Sit tight."

Laura brewed some coffee while we waited. She made it thick and black and steaming. I was on my second cup when Kilbourne arrived. He must have been taking a nap and left without using a comb. His hair was spiked. His eyes swept the room and paused on Laura's bruised face. His eyebrow, lifted in my direction, demanded an explanation.

I filled him in.

"All right," he said briskly, palm out. "Let's see the bills."

I handed him the bag. He extracted several specimens and nodded briskly. "Same run. All right, Miss Banton. Now tell me the story in your own words."

She looked numb and her voice was toneless. She described Steve's visit, how he'd left his brief case with a warning to guard it carefully, how she'd opened it after his death, found the money and given me some of the bills as a re-

tainer, how she'd found the fat man in the apartment and his demand for the note.

"He may have been looking for the money too," I said.

Kilbourne pushed his lips out thoughtfully. "Hugo Ritter. The name is unfamiliar. He may have signed the note with an alias."

"That's why I asked you to bring a fingerprint outfit," I said. "If Ritter left his digit signatures and they're on record with the FBI in Washington, you'll have a lead."

"You're clicking, counselor."

I asked Laura for a telephone directory and checked the names. No Hugo Ritter was listed, but he might have been staying at a hotel, with most of his calls made through a switchboard.

Kilbourne was on his knees, breathing against a doorknob to produce a vapor and examining it from an oblique angle. There were latent prints because he reached for his kit and used some dusting powder. The drawer pulls got a similar treatment and he photographed everything with a miniature camera.

Finally he straightened and glanced at Laura. "You live here, Miss Banton. Some of these prints will be yours. I'd like a set, so we don't wind up in a blind alley."

She submitted without protest. I had an idea that he wanted to check the girl too, find out if the Department of Justice had anything on her. She was wiping her fingertips with a tissue when Kilbourne packed away his equipment.

He had some blank sheets of paper and he prepared a statement which he asked her to sign. She did so, and he stood up, taking possession of the counterfeit bills. He grimaced ruefully and sighed. "There goes my night's sleep. Back to the office." He glanced at me. "Can I give you a lift?"

"Yes. Home."

He shifted to Laura. "I think you'll be safe, Miss Banton. We'll send a man over to keep an eye on this apartment. If Ritter shows up again, we'll nab him."

She nodded thankfully. Kilbourne waited until we were in his car before speaking again. "You've been accused of shelving her brother. Can you add anything to his background?"

"Very little. Until six months ago he was Vincent McIver's chauffeur. And he may have been skirmishing around with his employer's wife. Not the present Mrs. McIver. The one before."

"Would she know anything about him?"

"She's dead."

He threw me a quick glance. "How?"

I told him and added, "Since Banton quit his job he's been flying high, living in style."

"Could be he found a more profitable line—like the printing business. We'll have to dig into his background."

"Glad to have you aboard," I said fervently. "I'm tired of working alone."

He pulled the car over and clamped the brakes. "Here you are, counselor."

I thanked him and got out. My mind was on a hot tub and the yawning expanse of a new Beautyrest mattress when I opened the door. But I did not get to sleep, at least not right away. A light was burning in my living room and the picture tube was burning in my television set. Hazel was curled up on my sofa, shoes off, watching the Late Late Show.

"Surprised?"

"Pleasantly. Who let you in?"

"The super." She made a rabbit's nose. "Does he always open the door for girls?"

"Only when they're pretty and he thinks he's doing me a favor."

"You're not angry?"

"Not at you. And you deserve a reward for calling my boss and getting that message straight."

"What kind of a reward?"

"Stand up and find out."

She uncoiled herself and stalked toward me. I opened my arms. I smelled her hair and I could feel its texture. "Scott," she whispered against my lips. "Oh, Scott, I was so worried." Her mouth was sweet and charged with electricity. I broke it off with great reluctance.

"Act One," I said. "Second act to be continued in a moment." I reached for the telephone and dialed Max Turner. Max is a private detective who has helped me out on a number of occasions. The bell rang nine times before I heard his voice, thick with sleep.

"You must live a clean life," I told him. "Any man who can sleep as soundly as that has nothing on his conscience."

"Or a man with no conscience at all. This sounds like my lawyer friend, Scott Jordan."

"It is."

"Been expecting a call from you all day."

"Get out of bed, Max. There's work to be done."

He groaned. "Tonight?"

"Hazards of the trade. And no arguments please. Do I ever argue about your bills?"

"Not lately."

"Okay. Now listen, I want some information about a man named Hugo Ritter. It may be an alias. He's fat and no pleasure to look at. He's mixed up in some way with Steve Banton. He gave the deceased an I.O.U. for ten thousand dollars. I'd like to know where he lives."

"That's all you know?"

"That's all."

"It's not much."

"Granted. But I have confidence in you, Max. Put as many men on the job as you wish. Spare no expense. I want feelers out all over town. Use every contact you have. Work around the clock. Am I clear?"

"Yes."

"Then start rolling. And contact me the minute you have anything."

"Will do." He broke the connection.

I hung up and looked at Hazel.

"Act Two?" she asked hopefully.

"In jail," I said, "a man is forced to suppress all his normal impulses. Come here."

She accepted the invitation with alacrity. . . .

XIV

There was plenty of sting in Cassidy's voice the next morning. She opened fire the minute I walked into the office. I stood meekly enough and took it.

"There are some things I'd like to get off my chest," she said. "I worked for Oliver Wendell Rogers fifteen years and it was a pleasure. Why I put up with you I will never know. I am not a lawyer. I have never taken the Bar exam. I am not equipped to handle your clients or your practice, especially when I have to cope with journalists at the same time. Even at midnight I have to draw papers. I am not young any more. I just can't take it." She paused and peered at me closely. "My God, you look half-dead. What did those cops do to you last night?"

"It wasn't the cops." I headed for my desk in the other room. Cassidy was entitled to let off steam once in a while. "Bring your pad and let's make up for lost time."

Cassidy took my dictation, the only shorthand expert who could change pencils without losing a single word. I was winding it up when the telephone rang. It was Amy Van Dorn, sounding breathless and agitated.

"I'm glad you're in, Mr. Jordan. I must see you."

"When?"

"As soon as possible. It's very important. Can you drive out here right away?"

"Is your husband there?"

"He's in Philadelphia, seeing his publisher."

"I'll leave at once."

My sudden departure precipitated a few trenchant remarks from Cassidy. I took a cab up to the garage and got my car. Traffic was light on the West Side Highway and I breezed along, using the overpass at Riverdale. The house looked isolated against a backdrop of sky and river. A sprinkler system kept tossing water across the emerald lawn, the droplets glittering jewel-like against the bright sun.

A heavy woman in black bombazine opened the door. She waited under the portico, her broad Slavic face imperturbable. "You are Mr. Jordan?"

I nodded.

"Follow me, please."

Amy Van Dorn sat propped up against crisp pillows in a huge bed. She gave me a wan smile. "Would you care for anything? Coffee, or perhaps something stronger?"

"Thank you, no."

"Sit down, please."

I pulled a chair close to the bed, my attention drawn to her eyes. Always expressive they now had a haunted quality, pathetically tragic and pained. Her mouth, in contrast, looked thin and stubborn, as if she were inflexibly aware that an unpleasant decision had to be made, with no possible alternative.

"I read the papers," she said. "I know how busy you must be. It was kind of you to drop everything and come."

"You made it sound urgent."

"It is—at least to me." She looked tired and vulnerable. "I

need help, Mr. Jordan. I called you because I know that you're not Vincent's lawyer, not at the present time."

"He told you that?"

Color briefly touched her face. "I have a confession to make. I eavesdropped on your conversation with Vincent yesterday. I rolled my chair across the terrace and sat near the window, listening. Much of it confused me, but I heard enough to know that you do not represent him."

I kept a polite mask on my face and said nothing.

"Your talk was confidential and I'm not asking you to fill me in. But I don't want you to condemn me. I don't have very much left except Vincent and I like to know everything he's doing."

"Doesn't he tell you?"

She shrugged faintly. "Even married men demand a certain amount of privacy. And I don't like to keep prying and nagging." Her chin came up, suddenly square and determined. "I'm quite aware of my position, Mr. Jordan. Living here with me, in my condition, must be very difficult for a man of Vincent's temperament. He may not be young, but he's still vigorous, and if he tried to break loose once in a while . . . well, I'm an intensely jealous woman."

"Just what is it you want me to do?"

"I need your help."

"In what way?"

"I would like to know where Vincent goes and what he does when he's away from home."

I spread my hands and said, "I'm a lawyer, Mrs. McIver, not a private detective. I have neither the time nor the inclination for that kind of work. Why come to me?"

Her eyes were down on their hands and knees, pleading. "You don't have to do it personally, Mr. Jordan. You can hire someone. It would be highly impractical for me to start

interviewing private detectives. All I ask is that you act as intermediary. I know how simple this would be for you." Her fingers were clasped together in a kind of pathetic supplication. "My niece and her husband recognized your name when Vincent introduced you, and Arnold Parish told me some things about you. I'm out of touch with the world and I don't know where else to turn."

I probably knew from the beginning that my protests were merely technical, that I was going to help her. After all, Steve Banton had been employed by the McIvers and I could not afford to turn my back on any opportunity to learn more about his background. And if Vincent McIver had sucked me into a collusive divorce, I felt I owed him no obligation.

"Do you have any reason to distrust your husband?"

She clenched her fists tightly. "Yes."

"Is this just a suspicion or is it based on fact?"

"Fact, Mr. Jordan. God, how I wish it weren't." Pain shadowed her eyes. "I don't know when it started, but I first learned about it a week ago. I was here, resting, and Vincent was in his study, when the phone rang. Both rooms have extensions and we must have picked up the receivers simultaneously. I heard him say hello, and then a woman's voice, 'Is that you, Vinnie darling? This is Denise.'"

White lines framed Amy Van Dorn's mouth and her eyes were tortured. She took a breath and went on in a strained voice.

"For a moment, Vincent did not answer. And then he said harshly, 'I told you not to call me here,' and he hung up. The woman called his name once and then she hung up too."

Telling the story, getting it off her chest, had afforded Amy Van Dorn no therapy. Her blurred gaze was staring into the distance.

"That small piece of dialogue isn't conclusive," I said. "It doesn't prove anything."

But I really knew better. Vincent McIver was neither a monk nor a misogynist. With all glands and hormones functioning properly, it was inevitable that he would occasionally stray from the fireside in search of extracurricular diversion.

Amy Van Dorn shook her head. "There's more. That's why I called you. A letter came in today's mail. A letter addressed to Vincent. I knew it was from a woman."

"How did you know?"

"By the color and scent of the envelope. I had no right to open it, but I did. I couldn't help myself. I had to know the truth."

"And this letter confirmed your suspicions?"

"Yes." She got her chin firmly set. "I'd like you to read it." The envelope was under her pillow.

It was addressed to Vincent McIver in a small, sharply slanted handwriting. Pale blue vellum, squarely shaped and lightly perfumed. Feeling slightly like a Peeping Tom, I opened the flap and took out a sheet of paper.

VINCE DARLING,

Have I done anything to offend you? It's been over a week since you called. I'm really quite desolate.

Longingly,
DENISE

The paper did not match the envelope. It was white, with the words *Gracie Park Hotel* imprinted on top. I looked up at Amy Van Dorn.

"What if you learn the worst?"

She closed her eyes and swallowed hugely. "Then I'll need your advice about many things. I've got to be realistic, Mr. Jordan. I'd hate to leave my money to Vincent, knowing that

he was going to spend it on the same woman with whom he betrayed me while I was still alive."

"Would you divorce him?"

"If necessary." She managed a bleak smile. "The human spirit is extremely resilient, Mr. Jordan. I'm not going to die of a broken heart. From some other malady, yes. I'm not fooling myself. I know how ill I am. It's just a matter of time."

"As it is with all of us."

"In varying degrees, Mr. Jordan, depending on one's age and state of health. My time is short and I'm quite resigned. In any event, I have to know the truth about Vincent."

I nodded. "I'll do my best."

"About expenses . . ."

"We can discuss that later."

"Spend whatever is necessary."

"I'll use my discretion. Would you answer one question for me?"

She looked up. "Of course."

"Steve Banton was your chauffeur. Why did he quit his job?"

"He didn't quit, really. I fired him. The man had become quite impossible. He was both lazy and arrogant. He stopped washing the cars and he was very condescending about taking us for a drive. Vincent was inclined to be tolerant, but I saw no reason to put up with it. I told him he'd have to leave."

"How did Steve take it?"

"He seemed quite unconcerned. Apparently he didn't need the job."

"This letter from Denise . . ."

"Keep it. I don't want it around. Besides, you may need it for evidence."

I stood up. "That's all then. You'll be hearing from me."

I took one last look when I reached the door. She was lying very still, her face motionless, a brooding mask gazing into eternity. It was evident she did not like what she saw.

XV

The Buick was growing thirsty and I stopped off at a gas station. While an attendant filled my tank I used the telephone and dialed Max Turner.

"Well," I said, when his voice was in my ear, "what kind of a private detective are you? Loafing around in your office. Aren't you supposed to be out getting a line on Hugo Ritter for me?"

"Just got in," he said calmly. "Tried to reach you a little while ago."

"Any results?"

"Not yet. Feelers are out all over town. Got half a dozen men working. Every contact and stool pigeon has been promised a bonus. Wait till you get the bill."

"Stick with it. And I have another one for you, Max. Female, surname unknown, first name Denise, living at the Gracie Park Hotel. I want a line on her."

"Easy," he said.

"You sound smug."

"Happens I know the house dick in that trap. What kind of a line?"

"Everything you can get. Background, what she does for a living, for diversion, whom she sees. Hop up there now. I'll be in my office in about an hour and I'd like a report."

"You'll have one." A click and he was gone.

Good driving requires concentration and a simple brain. One eye on the road and one eye on the cars around you. The thinker, absorbed in weightier matters, is apt to be accident-prone. I was preoccupied and barely conscious of the wheel. Kaleidoscopic flashes of the past two days kept passing in quick review.

I thought of Laura Banton and the fat man searching her apartment. Hugo Ritter was on edge, anxious to destroy any evidence that might link him to Steve Banton.

A horn blasted beside me and the Buick rocked as I swung back sharply into my own lane. A car shot past, almost peeling my paint. I caught a fleeting glimpse of the driver, white-lipped and angry. I moved cautiously into the far right lane.

Careful, Jordan. You're in trouble enough. Don't add vehicular homicide to your headaches.

I had another moment of uneasiness, remembering that I had not kept my promise to Lieutenant Nola. I had failed to report in periodically as pledged.

I decided to call him the moment I reached the office, which I did, but he was out, and I got Sergeant Wienick instead. His voice was bitter. "He's up with the inspector. They almost put him back in harness for letting you go. You're a jinx, counselor."

"I feel like one. Tell him I phoned. Nothing new to report."

"Tell him yourself. In person. He wants to see you."

"I'll drop by this afternoon."

"Call first. He's looking for evidence. So far you're still the number one suspect." He rang off.

I sat back, trying to figure my next move.

Max Turner gave it to me.

He walked laconically into the office and sat, feet ex-

tended. Nominally, Benedict Milo and Max Turner were in the same business. Actually there was little resemblance. Max fulfilled a legitimate function. Skip-tracing and divorce played very little part in his operation. He had performed invaluable services in checking industrial espionage, and for me, on several occasions, he had dug up vital information to change the testimony of perjurious witnesses. Few men could surpass him in the art of shadowing.

He was tall and gangling, with sleepy eyes and unhurried movements and a filing-card memory. He accepted the cigar I proffered and sniffed it with admiration.

"Upman. High class. Happy to know somebody's making money."

"They're for special clients, Max."

He reached across the desk and dropped the cigar back into the humidor. "Don't want to develop expensive habits. Seems a shame to burn tobacco like that."

I put an end to the banter. "Let's have the dope on that girl, Denise."

"Sure." His eyes were lowered to half mast. "The name is Howard—Denise Howard. Age about twenty-eight. Aspiring actress. Played bit parts in Hollywood a couple of years ago. Contract never renewed. Occasionally does some television work, minor roles, nothing spectacular. Tried modeling, but the fashion magazines want a starved look. Denise is much too ripe. At the moment, she's marking time at the Andrew Norton Studios, dancing teacher. Augments her income several nights a week taking pictures in a night club, a small trap called the Club Maracas."

"What about her private life?"

"Any male who can afford the tab is eligible. She prefers big-shots. Working days and nights, she doesn't have too

much time. No special boy friend at the moment, according to my source."

Vincent McIver, I thought, was handling his affair cautiously and discreetly.

"What else, Max?"

"She enjoys liquor, often drinks alone, but can't hold it. Has red hair that doesn't come from a bottle, but she helps the color along a little whenever it grows dull."

"How do you know?"

"I was in her room and saw the bottle."

"I'm proud of you, Max."

"There's more." He looked demurely down his nose.

"Let's have it."

"She's five feet six inches tall, weighs a hundred and twenty-two pounds, measures thirty-six around the bust, twenty-one at the waist, and thirty-seven at the hips, with everything else scaled accordingly."

I stared at him suspiciously. "And where do these vital statistics come from?"

"The back of a photograph. One of those pictures that models send out trying to get work."

"Max, you're a genius."

"Conceded. So why don't you pay me like one?"

"You'll get your reward in heaven. I want more information about her social activities. Put a tail on her, Max, and let me know if she sees Vincent McIver."

He nodded.

I clasped my hands in supplication. I waved them in front of him. "And please, please, get me something on Hugo Ritter. If you fail, you may lose a customer."

"We're trying. Two men are checking every fleabag hotel in town. I may have some results by tonight. Where can I reach you?"

"I don't know. I'm leaving now to check in for some dancing lessons at the Andrew Norton Studios."

Max shook his head, looking at me with awe. "Dancing lessons yet—with a murder rap hanging over him."

XVI

The human biped is gregarious. He has a deep-rooted instinct for social intercourse. When darkness falls, the gathering places burgeon forth; the night clubs, gin mills, cabarets, and dance halls, all serving music. The music ranges from a blaring juke box in beer parlors to the famous name bands that alternate with Latin-American orchestras in our flossy supper clubs.

It gives the sexes a chance to embrace in public.

There is a law of physics which states that no two objects can occupy an identical space at the same time. But I have seen this law practically refuted by couples locked together in terpsichorean calisthenics tighter than passengers aboard the Bronx express at 5:30 P.M. of a workday afternoon. You pay for the privilege of being bumped, thumped, crowded, and jostled while enduring the din, smoke, alcohol fumes, and the inane chatter of happy idiocy. To say nothing about the overbearing hauteur of headwaiters. All of which, presumably, comes under the classification of pleasure.

Countless thousands, however, are unable to participate. The wallflowers, the oddballs, the sad sacks.

To remedy this deficiency, dancing schools have sprouted across the land from coast to coast. Near the top of this industry stands Mr. Andrew Norton, a foresighted gent who

has capitalized on the social needs of the race. His energy and enterprise have spawned a goliath organization dedicated to its mission of converting every wallflower, male or female, into an accomplished performer.

When lonely gents found that they could enjoy the company of attractive and sympathetic females for individual instruction, his early schools expanded and soon mushroomed from city to city. The cash registers clanked a happy obbligato to the canned music.

The physical trappings were impressive. The atmosphere was warm and friendly. Behind the reception desk sat a cordial brunette with a winning smile. She must have passed her training period *summa cum laude,* for she seemed genuinely pleased to see me.

"Good afternoon. May I help you in any way?"

I could think of several, but I kept them to myself. "I'd like some information about dancing lessons."

"Certainly. Is this your first visit to the Andrew Norton Studios?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Do you dance at all, Mr.—er—"

I said the first name that popped into my mind. "Astaire."

She smiled charmingly. "Not Fred, I assume."

"No, ma'am. Irving. Irving Astaire. I dance some, not much, mostly old-fashioned stuff, waltz, foxtrot, that sort of thing. But I seem to be out of step with the times, at least that's what my girl friends tell me. These days everybody seems to be concentrating on those Latin-American rhythms, and I feel like a pariah."

"I beg your pardon."

"An outcast."

"Oh, yes, of course, Mr. Astaire." Her smile was brilliant. She certainly had a fine set of crockery. "What you say is

quite true. No man is socially acceptable nowadays unless he's versatile on the dance floor. Even the rhumba is becoming passé. All the smart people are dancing guarachas, mambos, tangos, sambas, and boleros."

"That's what I mean."

"And you should certainly know the cha-cha-cha."

"Huh?"

"Haven't you heard of it? It's been the rage for some time."

"Are your lessons expensive?"

"Not at all. Only three-fifty a half-hour for individual instruction."

"How many lessons will I need?"

"That depends on many things, Mr. Astaire—your present ability, natural aptitudes, and your sense of rhythm. One of our instructors will give you a dance analysis. That helps us to estimate the amount of help you need. After that, I am certain we could arrange something that would fit your budget." She looked at me hopefully. "Can you spare some time right now?"

"Yes, ma'am. I was wondering if you could assign a particular instructor."

"If she's free, certainly. Whom did you have in mind?"

"Well," I said, "a friend of mine took some lessons here and the results were impressive. He used to be as graceful as an ox and now—well, I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. And he attributes his success to this instructor. He says she could even teach me. He says—"

"Do you remember her name?"

"Miss Howard—Denise Howard."

"Oh, yes." The brunette consulted a filing system. "You're in luck. Miss Howard is giving a lesson and should be free in about ten minutes. Can you wait?"

"Gladly."

"We can fill out this form in the meantime." She poised a pencil in mid-air. "What is your business, Mr. Astaire?"

"Advertising."

She wanted more statistics and I improvised. In case I left without a commitment they could bombard me by mail and phone. This was a costly setup and they would hate to lose a prospective customer.

I wondered, while I was waiting, whether Bill Postilie had managed to ram an indictment through the grand jury. I could have prevented it, I thought wildly, by kidnaping all those witnesses at the Wickford Arms and dissolving them in a lime pit.

"Mr. Astaire." The receptionist had called my name. "Down the corridor to Studio Six, please."

I got up and went, hearing the muffled sound of music, different bands, different tempos, emanating from different rooms. Studio Six turned out to be a medium-sized space complete with table, phonograph, and a stack of records. A girl turned to face me and I stopped on a dime.

While I may not be able always to suppress my feelings, I generally manage to conceal them. Not this time, however, for I recognized the girl and I knew my jaw was hanging slack. I got it back into position and manufactured an awkward smile.

The girl smiled back, accepting my reaction as a compliment, believing it had been caused by her appearance. Which it was, although not for the reason she thought. She was used to reactions, attributing them to the sudden activity of male hormones.

She was the same flaming redhead that Arnold Parish had gone to meet when I followed him to a tavern near his office.

None of the various items sold in lingerie shops to accentuate the female figure were needed. They could hardly im-

prove on a first-class situation. Nature had supplied Denise Howard with all the essential equipment. Its disposition was identical with other females, the difference here was a matter of proportion. Not that she was unique in any way. You can see her counterpart on calendars in barber shops.

Quite a girl, I thought. Romancing with Vincent McIver one day and trysting with Arnold Parish the next. At least she was keeping it in the family.

She sized me up, gauging the price of my haberdashery and practically counting the money in my wallet. Then she glanced at a slip of paper. "You're Mr. Astaire, aren't you?" Her diction was slow and studiedly careful.

"Yes, ma'am."

"I understand one of my former students gave me a very large recommendation."

"He sure did," I told her enthusiastically.

"I'm curious. Which one?"

I stalled for a moment. "I—er—you see, it's this way, Miss Howard. I met this chap at a party and when he saw I was having trouble with my rhumba he suggested that I take lessons. He mentioned your name and he said you did wonders for him. I never had much time for dancing. Too busy making my first million. Things are different now and I thought I'd come along and give it a whirl."

"Did your wife ever try to teach you?" I got the impression this was a standard question, designed to elicit a prospect's marital status.

"Haven't got a wife," I said.

"We can remedy that—the dancing I mean." Her smile was warm and intimate. "Let's see where you stand." She turned to the phonograph and sorted through a stack of records. "We'll start with a slow rhumba. That should help me to judge your ability."

A record slid along the spindle. The needle settled in its groove and electrical impulses were suddenly converted into sound. There was a subtle shift in atmosphere as maracas swished and shuffling gourds filled in a percussive pattern. Expert hands beat against a bongo and tapping claves set the rhythm.

No chamber music, this. It had none of the pianissimo or relaxing qualities of a lullaby. Nor was it slow; the first two bars maybe, and then it grew agitated, as if the musicians had suddenly been injected with a compound of Benzedrine and marijuana. It was music designed to reach inside, to quicken and inflame the blood.

For the first few minutes I got a solo exhibition. With her right hand cupped at her abdomen and her left hand out, bent at the elbow, she kept her feet moving in quick intricate steps that permitted a free-wheeling action of the hips. A lot of animal energy went into the performance. Then she stopped, laughing lightly, her face flushed, and cut the machine off.

"Do you like that?"

"Terrific," I said.

"You'll be able to do just as well after a few lessons."

"I doubt it."

"We'll see." Another record slid down the spindle, a slow rhumba this time. She came close to me, wearing a simple dress of wool jersey, and I thought if the manufacturer could only see his product now he would probably give his designer a raise—and the designer would feel that he had reached the ultimate point of his artistic endeavors.

I can do a fairly serviceable rhumba, nothing flashy, but this afternoon I had two left feet. Denise Howard quickly realized that she was in for no picnic. But she struggled

through to the end of the platter with a false smile in firm possession of her mouth.

"Well," she said encouragingly, "that wasn't too bad."

"It didn't seem right," I told her doubtfully.

"You don't practice enough, Mr. Astaire. That's why you feel awkward. But you have enormous possibilities and a fine sense of rhythm. We could do wonders for you. In no time at all you'd be the envy of all your friends."

"How much time?"

"That depends on how frequently you come and the length of your lessons. I imagine you'll want individual instruction, and arrangements would have to be made in the front office."

"Could I have you as an instructor?"

"I'm looking forward to it, but my hours are irregular."

"So are mine. I'm in a crazy business."

"Yes?" She was frankly curious. "What's that?"

"Advertising. I handle TV productions for my firm."

A calculating gleam came into the cobalt eyes and she cocked her head. "Well, isn't that a coincidence! I've done quite a bit of television work myself."

I peered at her closely and snapped my fingers. "Wait a minute. I thought you looked familiar. Didn't I see you in something a few weeks ago?"

"Only a small part."

"You were good. Who's your agent?"

"I don't have one."

"By George, my outfit can use a girl with your talents."

"I'm available, Mr. Astaire."

"Call me Irving. We ought to discuss this some time."

"How about tonight?" She seemed eager.

I hesitated fractionally and had a sudden inspiration. "Look, I'm not sure I can make it. Got a big conference later

this afternoon. I'm working on a new show, selecting material, lining up a cast, assigning a director, satisfying the sponsor, getting the sets built—the usual headaches . . ."

She looked impressed. I was impressed myself.

"You'll be free tonight?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Tell you what. Give me your telephone number and I'll call you."

She went for her purse like a scalded cat, got a pencil and a piece of paper and wrote. I took it and my face must have shown some reaction.

"Is anything wrong, Mr. Astaire?"

"No," I said, smiling. "I missed lunch today and that rhumba made me a little dizzy. Keep the evening open, Miss Howard. I'll call you."

Her voice trailed after me as I went through the door. "Don't forget . . ."

Out front, the supersaleswoman at the reception desk was promoting another prospect. She looked up and said quickly, "I'll be with you in just a moment, Mr. Astaire."

"Have to dash," I called back over my shoulder. "Urgent appointment."

"Don't you want to—"

"I sure do. Expect me back tomorrow morning." And then I was through the door and out of earshot. I hated to make her lose a commission, but I couldn't see myself reporting for mambo instruction out of pure philanthropy. The Andrew Norton Studios would survive without my business.

In front of the building I took out the pale blue envelope Amy Van Dorn had given me and compared it with the telephone number written by Denise Howard. The sharply slanted handwriting did not match the redhead's bold scrawl.

Denise Howard, obviously, had not composed the lovelorn note.

Who then? Or did I have the wrong girl?

That seemed unlikely, considering that she lived at the Gracie Park Hotel and was seeing Arnold Parish. One explanation came to mind. Some third party was trying to notify Amy Van Dorn that her husband was a chaser and had strayed from the reservation.

Parish, perhaps? Did he want Denise exclusively for himself? What I needed now was a sample of his handwriting too. But first I had promised to call Lieutenant Nola. I found a booth and dialed Homicide. The lieutenant was still out, and I used another dime to get Peter Kilbourne. There was an undercurrent of excitement in the Treasury man's voice.

"Jordan! Been trying to reach you. Did you get my message?"

"No. What's up?"

"Ever hear of a man named Borg—Louis Borg?"

It rang no bell.

"Apparently he's our boy," Kilbourne said. "Just got a report from Washington on those fingerprints we took from Laura Banton's apartment. Louis Borg—alias Hugo Ritter. A very slippery customer with quite a record. We picked him up on a narcotics charge four years ago; case dismissed, not enough evidence. A year later he was hauled in for mail fraud and managed to wriggle loose. Six months ago we had him on the hook again, interstate hijacking, but again he threw the line and got away."

"A brave guy," I said.

"How's that?"

"Tangling with Uncle Sam. Always involved in federal offenses."

"He'll slip one of these days and we'll land on him hard. This Banton business may be the opening we want."

"I'd like to nail him myself. Have you located him?"

"Not yet." Kilbourne paused for a second and then put some weight into his voice. "I'm going to make a suggestion, counselor. Stay away from Borg. Leave him to us."

"You're forgetting something," I said. "They're charging me with Steve Banton's murder. And this Borg—or Ritter—owed him ten thousand dollars. He seemed mighty anxious to keep the cops from making a connection. I've got to know what he's trying to hide."

"Just don't jam us up," Kilbourne said evenly.

"No, sir. I want to help. Excuse me, I've got to hang up."

It may have been rude to break the connection like that, but I was in no mood for admonition or intimidation.

Louis Borg—alias Hugo Ritter. How do you find a man in a city of eight million people? I sat in the booth, scowling in a fury of concentration, trying to break it down. It is not hard to maintain one's anonymity in a city like New York.

Suddenly I stirred. An idea had flashed across my brain. I punched a fist into my palm. It might work, I thought. It just barely might work.

I quit the booth and headed for the Wickford Arms under a full head of steam.

XVII

I wasted no time on underlings at the hotel. The desk clerk and the switchboard operator owed their loyalties to the State of New York. They were slated to be witnesses against me and would probably clam up tight.

So I headed straight for the manager's office.

He sat behind his desk, a short balding man with a dyspeptic face, holding a glass of milk in one hand and a partly consumed graham cracker in the other. Neither of them seemed to be giving him any pleasure.

It took about five minutes of rapid monologue to sell him a bill of goods, to convince him that I was not an ogre. Lieutenant Nola had already laid the groundwork by expressing skepticism concerning my guilt in the manager's presence.

He finally nodded, looking distastefully at the graham cracker. "Ulcers," he grumbled. "You think you got trouble? Try running a hotel some time. Too many reservations and not enough rooms, snotty bellhops, lazy chambermaids, temperamental clerks, and the union—always the union sticking its nose in where it doesn't belong and looking for trouble."

His indignation fed itself. "And on top of everything that Banton has to get himself killed right on the premises. A whole world full of space and he picks out this hotel. We spend a fortune for public relations and look what happens.

Pictures in the tabloids with arrows pointing. Who do the owners blame? Me. Because a man like Banton, they say, has no right living at the Wickford Arms." He threw his arms out. "What am I supposed to do? Get a Sunday school report on everybody who checks in?"

I expressed my heartfelt sympathy.

He took a sip of milk to cool his ulcers and gave a short hollow laugh.

"So you're back. That proves your innocence. I never did believe that eyewash about a criminal revisiting the scene of his crime. That's the one place he wouldn't visit. If I were a criminal I'd want to put as much geography between me and my crime as possible. Tell me, Jordan, what exactly can I do for you?"

He could stop exercising his larynx, a suggestion I kept to myself. After all, I needed a favor.

"Isn't it true," I asked, "that most hotels keep a record of all telephone calls made by guests?"

"Yes. We do it for billing purposes. You'd be surprised how many guests claim they're being overcharged."

"How long do you keep these records?"

"Until the bill is paid."

"Then you would still have a listing for the current month."

"That is right."

"How about incoming calls?"

"Only if the guest is out at the time and the caller wants to leave a message. The switchboard operator writes it down on a slip of paper and the desk clerk puts it in the proper box."

"No duplicates?"

"Please. We have enough paper work as it is."

I was disappointed. A message to call Louis Borg at a certain number would be just the lead I needed.

I said, "Would you have a list of the calls Steve Banton made from the beginning of this month up until the time he died?"

"Oh, yes."

"May I see it?"

He stood up. "Wait here."

I sat and listened to the muted sounds characteristic of a huge beehive like this, and then the manager came back, carrying a slip of paper. Only three numbers appeared, one of them more frequently than the rest. I copied them down and heard the manager's morose comment.

"No more bad publicity, I hope."

"Probably not." I thanked him for his trouble. He did not offer to shake my hand; it might still turn out to be the one that fired a shot.

I phoned Homicide from the lobby and this time Lieutenant Nola was in. I did not know what kind of a reception to expect and my greeting was tentative. He had reason to be sour. On the credit side, however, were the two items I had forwarded from Laura Banton, the piece of cloth and the I.O.U.

His voice was surprisingly mild. "Well, counselor, so you managed to pull a few strings. You're walking around free. In a murder case, yet. I congratulate you. That was quite a feat."

"Easy," I said. "District Attorney Lohman is a Democrat and Judge Felix Cobb is a Republican."

"I should have held onto you. You'd have been safer in jail."

"What do you mean?"

"They tell me you got jammed up again, passing counterfeit money."

"Nothing to it. I got a clean bill there."

"You were supposed to call me."

"I did, lieutenant."

"Yeah. Once today. And now I suppose you want a favor."

"More or less."

"Do you deserve it?"

"We're friends, John."

"I sometimes wonder. All right, let's have it."

"Got a pencil handy? Okay. Write these numbers down." I read them off to him. "Query the telephone company and find out whom they belong to. It's information they'd give only to the police department."

"Any of this connected with the Banton case?"

"I'm not sure. I don't want to give you any blind leads."

"Hold on." I heard him calling to someone with instructions, and then he was back. "What about that piece of cloth, the blue velveteen with the black sequins? I haven't been able to figure it. Any ideas?"

"All I know is that Banton gave it to his sister for safekeeping. How about that I.O.U. from Hugo Ritter? Anything on that?"

"Not yet. Kilbourne was down here to look at it. Have you any further information?"

"Yes. The name is an alias for Louis Borg, a goon with a record as long as your arm. I don't think you'd have his history or his picture on file because they're all federal offenses."

Nola's voice perked up. "Where did you get this?"

"From Kilbourne, a little while ago. Ritter paid Laura Banton a visit. He wanted that I.O.U. Kilbourne found some of his prints in her apartment and checked with the FBI."

Silence for a second. Very stony. "Why haven't I heard about this before?"

"I thought Kilbourne would tell you. I'm no longer respon-

sible, John. The load is too much for one man to carry. You can't expect me to keep everything in mind. If only—"

I stopped because there was no point in talking to myself. Nola had hung up, which gives you some idea of the state he was in.

I contributed another dime to the Bell System and this time Wienick took the call. He let me stew in my own juices for a moment before speaking.

"The lieutenant went outside to cool off."

"He was going to trace some telephone numbers for me."

"Yeah. He said to give you the information."

I went limp with relief.

"Here it is, Jordan. Two of those numbers are private lines, one belongs to Laura Banton and the other to a lawyer named Nicholas Strang. The third is a hotel on East 27th Street, the Cambridge. Anything else?"

"Yes. Tell the lieutenant I love him."

One thing about Nola. Even if he had a legitimate gripe, he never let it take him to extremes. I stepped out of the booth, perspiring. Three numbers. Laura I could understand. Nicholas Strang I would find out about later. But the Cambridge required immediate attention. A cab got me there in fifteen minutes.

It was an old building in a commercial area. It had a cheerless lobby, anemically illuminated, and a couple of dispirited palms drooping at either side of the desk. Beside the house phone I saw an easel bearing a poster which advertised a health club on the top floor. Steam room, Swedish massage, swimming pool, attendant on duty twenty-four hours a day.

I lifted the house phone and got the operator. "Hugo Ritter, please."

"One moment." The wires crackled. Then, "Oh, yes, Mr.

Ritter left a message. He's in the Health Club on the top floor. He said he'd be back in his room in about an hour. Any message?"

"Yes. Tell him that Mr. Banton called."

That was childish, but I couldn't resist it. If he ever got the message let him think the telephone company ran their lines right out of this world into the next.

I took the elevator up and when the door slid open I got my first whiff of the health club, an olfactory assault that reeked with alcohol, liniment, and stale air. Behind a wire cage, the colored attendant was dozing. When I cleared my throat he sat up, blinking.

"Anybody for handball?" I asked.

It seemed not. The only other customer was taking a steam bath. So I registered, checked my valuables and got assigned to a locker. I sat on a cold metal stool and stripped to the skin. I wrapped a towel around my waist and wandered out to the swimming pool. The water was spiked with enough chlorine to assassinate not only microbes, but any human reckless enough to take the plunge. I skirted the edge of the pool and headed toward a ponderous door marked *Steam Room.*

I opened it and stepped into a furnace.

Every pore in my body was instantly open and beginning to stream as the scorching vapor engulfed me. At first I was blind and then my eyes adapted themselves. Steam hung like a disembodied cloud just under the ceiling. Pipes encircling the room hissed steadily. I took a short breath and my chest felt scalded.

The room had one other occupant. I recognized him from Laura's description of Hugo Ritter. He was grossly fat. He squatted on a stool, with his hands hanging loose between his knees. The formidable bulge of his stomach looked as

hard as a medicine ball. His swarthy features seemed dwarfed in the heavy-set face. He sat motionless, an uncongenial Buddha dripping with moisture, trying to sweat off some of the surplus suet.

Apparently he preferred to cook himself rather than curb his appetite.

A bedtime snack of lasagna drowning in tomato sauce, three hundred calories to the mouthful. Overindulge and sweat. It kept establishments like this operating in dozens of spots across the city. Carouse all night, swilling rotgut, and sweat it out the next day. Exercise and self-control? Perish the thought. What would happen to the pharmaceutical companies that manufacture bicarbonate of soda and Epsom salts? Glut yourself and keep the economy healthy.

I reached for a stool and burned my fingers. I saw a length of rubber hose attached to a faucet and sprayed the stool with cold water. I sat down, my lungs fighting for air. How long could I last? Already I was beginning to feel like the main course of an African dinner, boiled haunch of missionary.

I looked at Hugo Ritter. "Whew! Hot, isn't it?"

All I got was an unsociable grunt.

"Mustn't stay here too long," I said authoritatively. "The human body is designed to operate most efficiently at certain temperatures, and extremes in either direction, hot or cold, are bad."

Still nothing. But now he was staring at me.

"This is murder," I groaned. "I wonder if the attendant has any salt tablets out there. We both ought to have one."

He broke training at last and spoke. "What for?"

"Sodium chloride. Absolutely essential to keep the body functioning properly. You lose a lot of salt when you perspire

and it should be replaced. Neglect a thing like that too long and the whole engine is liable to conk out."

"You a doctor?"

"Not me," I said. "Can't stand the sight of blood. I'm a lawyer."

He snorted and began to knead the calves of his legs. They were thick as pylons and stark white in contrast to his face.

I said, "What's the matter, Borg? Don't you like lawyers?"

His fingers stopped and the heavy face came up. He shifted ponderously to the edge of the stool, and his eyes were shallow between horizontal slits. His voice came out, low and even. "What did you call me?"

"Borg," I said. "Louis Borg. Or do you prefer the current alias, Hugo Ritter? Neither one is especially beautiful. And you shouldn't sneer at lawyers because you're going to need one very soon."

Nothing moved in his face. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about a man who loaned you ten thousand dollars and got himself murdered. Steve Banton. You went to see his sister because you were scared. You tried—"

Ritter was on his feet, head deep in his shoulders, bear-like. "Who are you, chum?"

"The light is bad in here," I said. "Otherwise you'd recognize my face. You must have seen it in the papers. My name is Jordan—Scott Jordan."

The steam in the pipes continued to hiss quietly. Water streamed off his chin. He ran a thumb across his forehead like a windshield wiper. "What's your game?"

"No game. I'd like to know why Banton loaned you ten thousand dollars. I'd like to know why you were so anxious to get your note back."

"He never loaned me a dime."

"That's a bad hand, Ritter. Throw it in. I've seen the note

and your signature can be verified. You tried to get it back from Banton's sister and she'll never forget your face. You left your fingerprints in her room and I had them checked with the FBI."

Dark venom burned in his eyes. "So she had the note all the time."

"No, sir. She gave the note to me and I sent it down to Homicide."

He shrugged massively. "That's what I wanted to avoid. After all, Banton was murdered. I was afraid if the cops found the note they might think I killed him to get out of paying the debt."

"Did you?"

He straightened. "I'm a legitimate businessman."

"Please," I said. "Your record is on file. Mail fraud, narcotics, hijacking."

"They never made anything stick. I was cleared on every charge."

"You were lucky. Why did Banton lend you ten grand?"

"I had a business deal and he wanted a piece of it. Look, Jordan, let's go down to my room and talk this thing over. It's too hot in here."

"And likely to get hotter."

I could barely endure it myself. Steam billowed around us. It condensed against the walls and they wept fat tears that hissed against the pipes. But it was private here and he had no weapon. At least that's what I thought.

"This is good enough," I said. "You want to lose weight, don't you? We'll stay put and you can tell me about your business deal with Steve Banton."

"It's a private matter."

"Nothing is private any more. Banton is dead. However,

I won't insist on it. If you don't want to tell me, you can talk to the police."

"No." His nostrils flared with a sharp intake of breath. "They wouldn't understand."

"Would the Treasury boys understand?"

"What's that?" His head was thrust forward, neck muscles tense.

"The Treasury boys. The United States Secret Service. They're always interested in counterfeiting. Isn't that what your deal was about, why you borrowed money from Banton?"

Borg laughed once, short and unconvincing. "You must have rocks in the head, chum."

"Think so, Ritter? I suggest you had the contacts. You knew the men who owned the plates and the printing press. They were turning out twenty-dollar bills, good enough to get past anyone except an expert. You wanted a consignment, but you needed money to close the deal. How much could you buy for ten grand? Forty, fifty, sixty thousand in counterfeit money? You got in touch with Banton and promised him a nice profit on his investment. He had the cash and he was just the boy for a shady deal like that."

Ritter did not move. A cluster of veins bulged and throbbed in his left temple. Guesswork, maybe, but I knew I was on the right track. I could see it in his eyes, in the gargoyle twist of his mouth.

"Banton was cautious," I went on. "He wanted to see the merchandise before he made a loan. So you brought him a couple of samples and he liked what he saw and he closed the deal and you were in business. Then, somehow, Banton got himself killed. You were in a stew, afraid they'd find the note and make an investigation. That was the last thing you wanted. You couldn't afford an investigation, not with this

load of counterfeit money at hand. So you nosed around and learned that Banton's sister had turned some items over to the police. You thought she might still have the note and the counterfeit samples and you paid her a visit."

His huge hands were held away from his body, like a professional wrestler, and the black hair lay matted across his chest.

"What happened?" I asked. "Did you have trouble with Banton? Did he demand a bigger cut? Were you forced to deal him out?"

He said thickly, "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Maybe and maybe not. But I wonder what the boys will find when they search your room. There isn't a place you could think of to hide those counterfeit bills they don't know about. They'll take the joint apart, piece by piece, and when they—"

Hugo Ritter had stopped listening. He wheeled and did a strange thing. He reached for one of the protective boards that went around the room, covering the pipes, and yanked. It came loose in a shower of plaster. He ripped out another one and I suddenly realized what he had in mind.

If he could force me back against those hissing, searing pipes it would take but a minute or so to put me out of commission. And that would give him time to reach his room and get rid of incriminating evidence.

He turned now, crouching like a bear, and came toward me.

XVIII

Hugo Ritter was breathing through his mouth. His jaw hung open, showing his lower row of teeth. He shuffled ponderously on bare feet, arms wide, closing the gap between us. I had assumed a boxer's stance and was watching him warily.

The heat was oppressive, a thunderous weight. Whatever happened would have to be short and pitiless. Neither of us could last long in this blistering inferno.

I said, "Don't be silly, Ritter. You're too fat."

He lunged. I sidestepped and shot my left at his jawbone. It caught him square, with a cracking noise, but he shook his head and whirled. For a man carrying all that weight he was remarkably fast. He kept stalking me, crowding me back.

I had to stay clear of the man; if those powerful arms encircled me I was dead. I aimed one at his bulging stomach and fired it like a piston. It jarred me to the shoulder. All it got me was a grunt and a pain in the wrist. His belly was like a sack of Portland cement. He swarmed in and suddenly we were locked together like a pair of wrestlers in a title match.

I strained and couldn't budge him. His weight forced me back. I could feel the hot breath of a pipe against my spine.

It could thoroughly broil a man in less than thirty seconds. His embrace was like a giant vise and my ears began to sing. I heaved desperately and brought my knee up.

It broke his grip and he fell back a step. We were both breathing in labored gasps. Ritter had been there too long, longer than I, and the heat was beginning to get him. He had to finish it now, at once, or not at all. He couldn't afford to miss. There was too much at stake. If they shipped him over for passing counterfeit money he'd come out an old man.

I saw it coming and I hurled myself sideways the instant he lunged. His shoulder spun me around, but momentum carried him forward. He could not apply his brakes; the floor was too slippery for traction, and the open pipes caught him across the midriff and he screamed like a horse in a burning barn and dropped to his knees.

I stood with my heart pounding, and then I reached under his arms and dragged him across the floor and through the heavy door. The normal temperature hit us like an Arctic chill. I looked down at Hugo Ritter. He had fainted, mouth open, teeth naked to the gums. His stomach was fire-red, blistering already.

I remembered seeing a telephone booth in the locker room and I got a dime from the attendant and rang Kilbourne. I briefed him quickly, with no embellishments.

He used a nasty word. "So you had to play it cute," he said bitterly. "You had to tackle it alone."

"I didn't know how deeply the man was involved."

"Well, you found out."

"I also found out that he probably has a lot of counterfeit paper cached away in his room and if you shake a leg—"

"Wait there," he snapped.

"Look, Pete, you don't need me and besides—"

I was talking into an empty line. Kilbourne was on his way. I went back to the attendant. "Is there a house doctor in the building?"

"No, sir."

"You'd better call someone then. That man in the steam room slipped and fell against the pipes and hurt himself pretty bad."

He didn't believe me. "You kidding? Those pipes are covered."

"Not well enough. One of the boards came off when he grabbed it for support. I pulled him out and he's lying near the swimming pool. He needs some medication fast."

The attendant went to look for himself.

I had lost too much water. I felt dehydrated, like one of those ducks hanging in the window of a Chinese grocery store. I stepped under a shower briefly and threw my clothes on.

When I reached the lobby I paused to phone Lieutenant Nola. "Would you like a lead in the Banton killing, John?"

"I'll take anything."

"I located Hugo Ritter. He's at the Cambridge on 27th Street."

He was suddenly curt. "Did you know that when Wienick gave you the name of the hotel?"

"No, sir."

"Is he there now?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you notified Kilbourne?"

"He's on his way."

"Congratulations. You used your head for a change. No grandstand play without our help."

I cleared my throat apologetically. "Look, John, I—er—"

His line was dead too. John had broken the connection and

was heading this way. If I hung around they might keep me tied up for the next few hours, so I walked out, turned the corner, and kept moving.

I stopped off at the first drugstore and got myself hydrated again. I drank three glasses of seltzer and two glasses of water. I felt bloated, and I sat there for a moment, thinking.

Hugo Ritter was out of my hands now. But another man had telephoned Steve Banton and left his number. Nicholas Strang. He was due for another visit.

The afternoon was gone and Strang had probably left his office, so I decided to try his apartment. He was home and answered the bell, wearing a smoking jacket. His eyes showed surprise when they saw me at the door.

He hesitated, searching my face, then he carefully put together a smile, and invited me in. All the standard equipment and appurtenances to a bachelor's apartment were present, including a cellarette with a varied assortment. The television set was playing and he flipped it off with an apologetic grin.

"Trying to catch a news broadcast," he said. "And here I am with a brief case full of work, wasting my time on a lot of puerile nonsense. Wish I'd never bought it."

"You can throw it away."

"Hell, no." His manner was hearty, but his eyes were guarded and watchful. "It's great for entertaining a high blonde with a low IQ. Saves me the job of making conversation. Will you have a drink?"

"Bourbon and soda."

He put the ingredients together in a small glass, and mixed one for himself.

"Skoal!" he said, and sipped. "I'd like to congratulate you."

"On what?"

"That neat little maneuver you pulled off last night. The

boys were talking about it this afternoon. They say it's the first time anybody ever got released on bail in a murder charge."

"It's not the first time and there's nothing in the books that denies Cobb the right to grant it."

"I wouldn't know. Criminal law is a little out of my line."

"I suggest you bone up."

He looked at me sharply. "What does that mean?"

"It might come in handy. Things are developing in the Banton case. It's wide open. Anybody can become involved."

"Not me." He emphasized both words.

"Wasn't Banton a friend of yours?"

"Never."

"Or maybe a client?"

"I wouldn't have touched him with a ten-foot pole."

"Still you had one thing in common."

"What?"

"Claire McIver."

He put his glass down hard. "Not Banton. Never. I thought I told you that. Say what you like about Claire, but she had taste and discernment. Banton was not the sort of man she—" He caught himself and tightened his lips.

As a lawyer he should have thought before speaking and then held his tongue. I finished it for him.

"You were going to say that Banton was not the sort of man she'd look at twice. But she did more than look at him. She accompanied him to a hotel room. Only if what you say is true, there was nothing romantic in the rendezvous. And Lohman is right. Her divorce was a fraud against the state."

Now Strang reversed his field. He shook his head, trying to look confused. "I don't know. I just don't know. Believe me, Jordan, I was shocked when I heard about it."

"And you claim innocence."

"Emphatically. I'm a reputable attorney."

"We'll see about the adjective. Because that raid had the sure touch of an attorney's hand. And there were only two attorneys involved. You and me. I happen to know the part I played. I'm not sure about you."

He shook his head. "Any private detective who specializes in divorce evidence would know the requirements and how to fill them."

"Perhaps. Only Benedict Milo pleads not guilty."

"Then he's lying."

"Can I tell him you said so?"

He moistened his lips slowly, holding himself in. "Just what are you trying to prove, Jordan?"

"A lot of things. That you weren't shocked when you heard about Claire and Banton. That you knew about the raid and it was your show. That you told McIver to hire Benedict Milo."

The gears were slipping and I saw his neck begin to swell. It inched truculently out of his collar. "Let's get squared away, Jordan. Are you trying to shove this whole thing off on me?"

"If possible."

"And what will you gain?"

"Plenty. According to Lohman I'm guilty of collusion. He claims I killed Banton to escape that charge. If I clear myself on the first, it will help cancel the second."

"Not at my expense. Get off the hook some other way."

"All I want, Strang, is the truth."

"Then find it somewhere else."

I shook my head, smiling thinly. "I'd be wasting my time. I think it's right here."

He was in a quandary. He wanted to get rid of me, but he

was curious. He had to know what was needling me. "All right," he said. "Talk up."

I tasted the bourbon and put the glass down. I took my time answering. "Item one, shortly after I left your office you went to see Milo and had words with him. Item two, just before his death you'd been in contact with Banton—"

"Who says?"

"I do. He called you on the phone."

Strang's face lost all expression. "Is my line tapped?"

"No. Banton's hotel has a record of the call and the date. He spoke to you the day before he was killed."

Silence for a second. His narrowed forehead belied the indifferent gesture. "Maybe he did call. But he never reached me and I have no idea what he wanted."

"Find another hole, Strang. That one doesn't fit. If the call hadn't been completed they would have canceled the charge."

He walked to the window and faced me. "So he called. Go ahead, make something of it."

"What did he want?"

"Nothing. I had called him first and left a message. He simply rang me back."

"And what was on your mind?"

"Not that it's any of your business, Jordan, but I'll tell you anyway. I knew about Lohman's interest in the McIver divorce. My name was in the records and one of his men had queried me. When he left I was curious and I phoned Banton. I wanted to know the facts and how he intended to testify. I wanted to give him some advice."

"What kind of advice?"

"To tell the truth."

I shook my head. "You may be a good lawyer, Strang, but you'd make a lousy witness. Any competent cross-exam-

iner could turn your testimony into a shambles. First you say that Claire wouldn't look twice at Banton. Now you're intimating the raid was legitimate. You've got her capering around a hotel room with the man and that sheds a different light on the lady's morals. You acted shocked when I told you about the picture, but the performance was phony. You claim you're innocent, but you can't wait to start coaching Milo and Banton about their testimony. Lies, nothing but lies, one after the other."

His jaw rippled. "Get out," he said, his voice thick and indistinct. He strode to the door and opened it, trembling a little.

"I'm going to pin it on you, boy."

"Out." His face was mottled.

I sauntered past him into the hall. "The gloves are off, Strang, and you're—"

The whole building seemed to shake as he slammed the door.

I regretted having drunk his bourbon. It's not polite to accept a man's hospitality and try to ruin him at the same time.

I remembered a promise to call Denise Howard, but it was a little early, so I dialed Amy Van Dorn first. I could let her know that I was working and perhaps ease some of her anxiety. She recognized my voice.

"Oh, Mr. Jordan, have you learned anything?"

"Yes. That letter for Vincent seems to be a forgery. The girl —her full name is Denise Howard—did not write it."

Amy was grasping at straws. "You mean Vincent doesn't even know the girl?"

"I didn't say that. I merely said that she did not write the letter."

Her voice rose querulously. "Then who did?"

"I'm not sure and I won't make any guesses, but I have an idea. I'll tell you later."

"Have you seen the girl?"

"Yes."

A pause. "Is—is she young . . . attractive?"

"Depends on your taste," I said.

"At least you've gotten some results. I haven't heard from that other man at all."

"What other man?"

"Well," she said lamely, "after you left I was so upset I called my niece and told her about Vincent. She said she knew of a private detective and would hire him right away."

Women, I thought. *Oh, brother!* But I let it go.

"Is Vincent still out of town?"

"He's back now. He phoned from the station and told me he'd be delayed. He was going to see Miss Adams, a girl who used to work for him and—"

"Excuse me," I cut in shortly. "I'll be in touch. Good-by."

Mostly it was reflex and I was moving before any thoughts had crystallized. McIver and Hazel. What the devil was he after? I whistled up a cab and gave the driver Hazel's address. I sat on the edge of the seat and my spine was cold. What ailed me anyway? Why the sudden premonition?

Ninety-nine out of a hundred cabbies use a heavy foot on the gas pedal. I had to pick the one long-shot who kept braking cautiously and tooting his horn.

I growled at him. "We're crawling. A hundred and eighty horsepower you got in this crate. Put a couple of them to work."

He twisted his head. "Look, Mac. I'm an independent owner and this is a brand-new job. You can't race a tight engine. What's the rush? You having a baby or something?"

I controlled myself and we finally reached Hazel's apart-

ment. But he was an independent businessman, so I didn't insult him with a tip, and I won't bother to repeat his comment on my ancestry.

I listened at Hazel's door. No sound. I tried the knob. It was locked. I rang the bell. After a moment Hazel opened the door and flashed me a warm smile. "Scott!"

"Are you all right?"

"Of course. Why shouldn't I be?" A slight frown clouding her forehead. "I don't remember; do we have an appointment this evening?"

"Not exactly. Must I stand here in the hall?"

"I'm sorry, Scott. You took me by surprise. Come on in. I have company."

Vincent McIver started to get up off the sofa, and changed his mind. There was a pile of manuscript pages on his lap. Instead he offered me his hand and an apology.

"Rough draft of a new book," he explained. "Just came from Philadelphia with a green light from my publishers. First acceptable job in years." His tanned face was flushed and his manner buoyant. "Hope I'm not interfering with your plans. Hazel is going to type a clean draft for me. I'll be finished in a couple of minutes."

"Take your time. And congratulations on the book."

"Thanks. Historical romance. This one's something new for me. Costume piece. Don't think it can miss. It has everything, the works—sex, religion, psychology, and the bitchiest heroine since Marie Antoinette."

Hazel smiled. "Will you excuse us, Scott? There's some gin and vermouth in the kitchen. Mix yourself a drink."

McIver was staring at me. "You look rather peaked, Jordan. Don't you feel well?"

"Just a little weak," I said. "Had a Turkish bath this afternoon and sat in the steam room too long."

I went to the kitchen and sat down with a glass of milk. I could hear McIver shuffling papers and giving instructions to Hazel in the other room. Seems he couldn't start revising until he had a clean copy. I could appreciate his problem. Drawing an appeals brief requires the juggling of words and phrases to some extent.

I joined them in the living room. Hazel was following his instructions, her body bent forward eagerly, her eyes alert. A full day of work behind her and she looked as fresh as a morning in spring.

McIver rose then, and offered his hand. He held onto mine for a moment. "That Banton business really shocked me, Jordan. Don't know how many times I tried to reach you that night, but I couldn't seem to get an answer." He moved his shoulders. "At least they weren't foolish enough to hold you."

"My freedom is temporary. I'm only out on bail."

His brows descended in a sympathetic frown. "I'd like to help. In a way, I'm responsible."

Hazel nodded. "So am I."

"Fine," I said. "You can both join me in jail."

A wry smile twitched at a corner of McIver's mouth. "Aren't you being unduly pessimistic?"

"I hope so. Believe me. Anyway, thanks for the offer. If I think of anything, I'll let you know."

"Please do." He turned to Hazel. "When will you start working?"

"Tonight. If I have any problems I'll call you at home."

"I'll be there in a couple of hours. And put both your girls to work on it first thing in the morning."

He shook my hand again and was gone. I leaned against the door and put my ear against it. Hazel widened her eyes and started to say something, but I signaled her with a finger

against my lips. I heard the elevator door open and close.

"Work to do," I said, twisting the knob. "Call you later."

"Scott, for heaven's sake, what—"

I lost her voice on my way to the stairs.

XIX

I took the stairs three at a time, letting gravity do most of the work, hoping to reach the street with all bones intact. Even so, McIver's vertical descent was swifter and he almost eluded me. When I broke through the lobby door, his cab was pulling away.

I caught another on the run. This driver compensated for the last. He was good, very good. Tailing a car in Manhattan traffic requires a rare combination of audacity, ability, and luck. He had them all, weaving in and out, just managing to catch the lights. And he was sage enough to stop at a discreet distance when the car ahead pulled up at the Gracie Park Hotel.

Why, you old goat, I thought, no wonder you won't be home for a couple of hours. He was taking this opportunity to kick his heels a little.

I gave the driver a five-dollar bill and told him to keep the change. He looked at me hopefully. "You want I should wait?"

I told him no, and waited a moment on the pavement, giving McIver enough time to reach his destination. I had no specific plan in mind and decided to let my next move hinge on any dialogue I might be able to hear.

The Gracie Park was an old-fashioned piece of architec-

ture with a crystal chandelier burning in the vaulted arch overhead and some recently oiled woodwork. I knew Denise Howard's room number from Max Turner's report.

It was on the third floor, located around a bend in the corridor. I dropped to one knee and sighted through the keyhole. All I could see were two legs, the wooden leg of a table and the trousered leg of a man. But while visibility may have been limited, audibility was fine, due partly to good acoustics, a poorly fitting door, and the increased decibels that resulted from strong emotions.

McIver spoke with feeling.

"Look here, Denise. I want this understood. You're not to call me. Under any circumstances. In the unlikely event that I should ever want to see you again, I'll let you know. Now I'm telling you this in a fairly civilized manner, but if you insist on making a nuisance of yourself, stronger measures will be taken."

"I don't understand, Vince." Denise Howard was not whining and her voice revealed no hurt. "When you first met me you were so attentive and I thought—"

"You had no right to think anything. We had a few pleasant interludes together and that's all. I made no passes, no promises, and no commitments. You're a big girl now and you've been around. I'm not the first man who ever took you out, so don't try to parlay a few dates into a deathless romance. I'm a married man and I don't want to get involved."

"Then why did you start with me in the first place?"

"You have a short memory, Denise. It was the other way around. You started with me. You happen to be an extremely attractive female and a man may sometimes forget himself."

"But I like you, Vince, I really do."

"That's very flattering, but you're wasting your time. With

your face and figure you'll have no difficulty finding someone more appropriate."

"Young men bore me."

"There are more than eight million people in New York, Denise, half of them males. Why concentrate on someone you can't have?"

"Because you're the one I want."

"I doubt that," he told her with heavy irony. "You're after something else. Is it money?"

"Now, Vince, that's no way—"

"It wouldn't do you any good. I have no money. Why don't you put your cards on the table?"

"All I want is you."

His voice became sharp with irritation. "That's out. I'm not available. Do I have to draw a diagram?"

"A man owes some obligation to—"

"I owe you absolutely nothing. I want you to stop calling. My wife is ill and if she hears about you it won't do her any good. Just stop calling. Will you promise me that?"

"On one condition." She certainly had persistence, I thought.

He gave a martyred sigh. "What is it?"

"If you'll just see me once in a while—now, wait, let me finish. There are plenty of secluded spots where no one you know would be likely to see us. Or we can spend a quiet evening here. That isn't much to ask, Vince. It's a small concession and I promise to be satisfied."

"I'll think it over."

"Will you call me?"

"Yes."

"Can I have one kiss before you leave?"

Denise Howard was a very desirable target. No permanent trauma would result from a kiss or two. Now I saw five

legs and one still belonged to a table. The other two pair were facing each other, the nyloned ones up on tiptoe, while all dialogue was temporarily suspended. Vincent McIver made no attempt to short-change the girl. On the contrary, for a man trying to cut loose, he seemed to be lingering beyond the call of duty.

I took off before they broke. This time it was I who got to the street first. I had no special desire to see Denise this evening and I went back to Hazel's.

Her typewriter was going when I rang the bell. She opened the door and put her hands on her hips. "No excuses, now. I want to know what that was all about."

"How about a cup of coffee first?"

"Coffee second. Talk first."

"Okay." I pushed past her and sat down. "He said he wouldn't be home for a couple of hours and I wanted to know where he was going."

"Why?"

"Curiosity."

"I don't believe you."

"Naturally. Nobody believes the truth."

"All right. You may have been curious, but that's only part of it. What's the rest?"

I shook my head. "Sorry. A lawyer isn't supposed to divulge confidential communications without the permission of his client."

"I didn't know you had a client in this case."

"The case has broadened its scope and I now have a client."

She made a funny mouth. "Is that all you want, coffee?"

"And companionship, tender, understanding, sympathetic."

"You don't deserve it. However—"

The phone rang and she went to get it. She turned, holding out the instrument. "It's for you."

"Me?" I blinked. "Who wants me?"

"Some female."

I spoke warily into the mouthpiece. A voice said, "Scott?"

"Cassidy." I was relieved. "How did you know where to find me?"

"Ingenuity. I've been calling all the numbers in your private book."

"You're going to get me into a serious jam one of these days."

"You're in a serious jam already. A Mr. Peter Kilbourne of the United States Secret Service has been trying to reach you. Better call his office."

"Right away." We hung up and I waited a second for the dial tone. When I heard Kilbourne's voice I said, "Scott Jordan, Pete."

"Where are you?"

"Visiting a friend."

"Get your tail down here right away, mister. And I don't mean tomorrow." A click and his line went dead.

I looked at Hazel and said, "Forget the coffee. I have to leave."

"My God! I'd be better off dating a doctor. You're the most peripatetic lawyer I ever met."

"Peripatetic," I said. "That's pretty good. And what are you complaining about? You have to work on McIver's manuscript."

"Shall I keep the coffee warm for you?"

"If you please. And yourself, too."

She reached for a paperweight and held it threateningly. "Oh," she groaned with exaggerated frustration. "Get out of here."

XX

Kilbourne wanted a full statement in my own handwriting on the Ritter incident. The government supplied the paper and I supplied the pen. It took four pages and left me with cramped fingers. When I finished he read it through carefully and took it to another office.

I sat for about ten minutes, cooling my heels. The door opened twice and different faces peered in to take a look at me. I was thinking of leaving when Kilbourne returned.

"Where is Ritter now?" I asked him.

"In the hospital, under guard and under sedation. He may need a skin graft. From there he goes to the Federal House of Detention pending trial."

"Then you found the money?"

"It's not money. It's worthless paper. Yes, we found it in his room, about fifty thousand dollars worth, well hidden, some in the false bottom of his luggage, more in the lining of an overcoat."

"Does the government appreciate my efforts?"

"If you mean are we going to pin a medal on you or ask Congress for a special appropriation, no. Ritter is nothing. We want the brains of this outfit, the boys who print and distribute the stuff."

"Ritter knows where it came from. Can't you loosen his tongue?"

"I don't know. We haven't had a chance. The medics gave him a hypodermic and he hasn't come out of it yet."

"He was conscious when you first reached him, wasn't he?"

"Conscious enough to keep his lips buttoned."

"Why didn't you promise him a deal, light punishment if he co-operates?"

"We did, and he dummied up more." Kilbourne looked sour. "Ritter is frightened. He's scared green the syndicate would remember and cut him down when he got out."

"You could have promised him protection."

Kilbourne found a loose cigarette and rolled it between his fingers. "He knows what our promises are worth. What could we do, assign a couple of agents to live with him the rest of his life? He'd be under a constant threat."

"Not if the gang got shipped over for long terms. They can't hurt him from Alcatraz. You've got Ritter over a barrel, Pete. He's no kid. A prison term would just about finish him. I think he'd crack if you threw the book at him."

Kilbourne lit his cigarette. "We haven't stopped hammering at him yet, not by a long shot."

"Did you ask him about Steve Banton?"

"Not me. Lieutenant Nola managed a few questions in the ambulance. Ritter broke a little on that. It seems Banton had the money and Ritter the contacts. He gave Banton a few samples, I imagine the same bills you got from the sister."

"What about the homicide?"

"Ah, yes." Kilbourne's smile was dry. "On that, Ritter became articulate, vociferous in fact. He swore up, down, and sideways that he was innocent."

"Did it sound like the truth?"

"How can you tell? A man like Ritter has no conscience,

no ethical standards, no sense of decency. Lying comes natural to him."

"They could have had a quarrel," I said. "And Ritter may have decided to eliminate his partner."

Kilbourne eyed me quizzically. "You'd like to prove that, wouldn't you?"

"And how!"

"Then why didn't Ritter clean up the loose ends by destroying the note?"

"Because he couldn't find it. Banton had cached it with his sister. You can't say Ritter didn't try as soon as he learned where to look."

Kilbourne sucked meditatively on his cigarette. "Makes sense."

"Yeah," I said glumly, "but there's no proof, not a shred of evidence. So far it all points to me."

Kilbourne aimed the lighted tip of his cigarette at me. "And it's worse than you think, Jordan. If the kingpins in this racket find out how Ritter got taken, they may decide that you know more than you're telling."

The thought was unpleasant and it unnerved me. I sat, worriedly chewing the inside of my cheek. "I really don't know a thing."

"That may be. However, Ritter hates your insides. He may decide to put a bug in their ear. He has no other way of getting at you."

"He can't," I said. "He's out of circulation."

"Only to a certain extent. He's entitled to a lawyer and the syndicate will probably supply one of their own, for self-protection, to keep him in line. We can't censor Ritter's conversations with his mouthpiece."

I took out a handkerchief and blotted my forehead. As if I didn't have enough troubles already. I stood up and

Kilbourne walked along the corridor with me. At the elevator he shook my hand.

"Cheer up, Jordan," he told me. "And be careful. Don't stop any bullets."

I felt hollow going down in the elevator. This was something I hadn't bargained for. The State of New York was after me, too. But the state had to move in a prescribed manner. They were bound by due processes of law. I had no way of knowing how or when an underworld organization would strike.

At that time of night, on Church Street, at the lower end of Manhattan, the narrow streets are dark and deserted, tunneling between shadowed buildings. A car suddenly roared past and backfired and I dove into the sidewalk, commando style. Pure reflex, it was, and I stayed down until my heart fluttered back to its normal beat. Then I hotfooted it to a lighted subway kiosk, feeling almost naked without a gun.

But I had no intention of going home to find one. Ritter's friends might be waiting. Instead I went straight to Hazel's.

"Perfect timing," she said. "I was just about to quit work. A very readable novel our friend McIver has written. The beginning, anyway." She put her head back and contemplated me curiously. "You never look normal any more. Now what's the matter?"

"Can I stay here tonight?"

She raised an eyebrow. "What made you change your mind?"

"It's safer."

"That's what you think. All right, take your coat off, don't just stand there. Are you hungry?"

"Uh-huh."

"I'll fix something."

Scrambled eggs, she made, with onions and mushrooms, and I wolfed them.

"When was the last time you ate?" Hazel asked.

"I don't remember."

"You understand about tonight, lover—same sofa, same conditions."

"Yes, ma'am."

She showed a flash of indignation. "You don't have to be so compliant. You can at least act frustrated. A girl likes to think she has some attraction." She put her head to one side. "Tell me the truth, Scott. Have you ever really been in love?"

I poured more coffee. "Love?"

"L-o-v-e. Love. Do you know what it is?"

"Sure. It's a word, a synonym for the biological impulse used by song writers. It's an illusion."

"An enchanting illusion, Scott. Look at the wonderful effect it has."

"Wonderful? It reduces a man's intelligence, erases his judgment, and cancels his freedom."

She gave me a pitying look. "Something must have happened to you when you were a little boy."

I groaned. "Here we go again."

"I'm serious, Scott. But even if what you say is true, if it does all those things to a man, look what he gets in exchange."

"What?"

"Three vital necessities of life, concupiscence, companionship, and children."

"They're alliterative, anyway. How vital are they?"

"Well," she said sweetly, "let us take concupiscence first. Suppose you learned that you could never again—"

"Conceded. Skip concupiscence."

"Second, companionship. You're young now, Scott, still de-

sirable, and able to go tomcatting all around town. What will happen thirty years from now, when you're old and wrinkled and decrepit and living in solitude, lonely, unwanted, unloved, nobody to—"

"Enough. Conceded." It was a fearsome glance into the future.

"And as for children," she went on, "well, it just isn't normal for a man to live and die without leaving any trace of his existence. Psychologically, every man wants to perpetuate his own image. And biologically, it's his sacred duty. The human race has to propagate. Do you want to be responsible for handing the earth back to the insects and the reptiles, centuries of civilization obliterated, anarchy and barbarism, darkness and—"

I threw my hands up. "I give up. You win."

But I was skating on very thin ice here and I had to be careful. Hazel had me cornered.

"What are you going to do about it, Scott?"

"I'm going to sleep on it. This requires careful thought. May I have my blankets, please?"

XXI

Sleep eluded me. I couldn't relax. Disconnected thoughts kept chasing each other through my brain. How would it feel to be a cardholder in a good union with a steady job and a placid wife? Withholding tax deducted at the source. Nothing to worry about. Those boys slept fine, I bet.

Maybe I was in the wrong business.

The forty-eight hours grace Nola had given me was over. But I was out on bail, and how long would that last, if the indictment went through and Lohman demanded another hearing? Time was valuable and I started to work out a schedule for the morning.

Benedict Milo was on the list. He might be able to tell me how Arnold Parish got that snapshot of Claire and Banton. And I wanted to see Parish, too, for a sample of his handwriting. I kept wondering why he'd turned the snapshot over to the district attorney.

Claire and Banton. They were both dead now. I knew a little about Banton's death and nothing about Claire's. Could they be connected in any way? I decided to make the Public Library my first visit the next morning.

After breakfast and some light sniping from Hazel I stopped off at the library and went to the room where back copies of newspapers are on file.

I checked the index and requisitioned a seven-months-old supply of papers.

Claire McIver's death, on a moonless Thursday night, was not front-page news. It got the usual coverage on a back page. As reconstructed by the police, she had been driving through Van Cortlandt Park around one A.M. when her right front tire went flat, forcing her to stop. Apparently she had stepped out into the road to flag some passing motorist. One finally came along, but he was traveling too fast, or his windshield was fogged, and he failed to see her until it was too late. By the time his brakes were holding, Claire lay crumpled at the side of the road.

Presumably, he had run back to learn the damage. He realized at once that she was beyond help, and then he saw her jewelry. Whatever rationalization he offered his conscience, he must have decided that so much wealth could do him more good than its owner. There were scratches on her fingers and on her earlobes testifying to its hasty removal.

Estimated value, according to Mr. Nicholas Strang, her escort earlier in the evening, would be about forty thousand dollars.

I had a hunch and turned the pages of a tabloid, and sure enough, there in the middle fold, was a picture. A cruising photographer had caught the police call on his shortwave radio and had reached the scene immediately after the first prowl car. She lay across the road, stark in the flashbulb's glare, with shadowy trees hovering in the background, a formless lump under a soiled blanket. I saw part of her skirt, protruding under one edge of the blanket. Tiny facets of light glittered on the fabric and I had a vague impression of something wanting to be remembered. It kept gnawing at my brain.

The hit-and-run driver had never been found. He could

have been from out of town. The police could not subject every car in New York and its suburbs to a laboratory check.

In two days the story was forgotten. And why not, I thought. Vehicular homicide has accounted for more than a million victims. People are expendable and one more death is insignificant. The assembly lines in Detroit will never beat out the American birth rate.

I left the basement for the main floor and called my office. Amy Van Dorn had left word with Cassidy that she was coming in to see me at two o'clock.

"You must be mistaken," I said. "She's in a wheel chair."

Her voice was tart. "Call her and check."

"Not necessary. I apologize."

"When will you be here?"

"Soon. If I ever get clear of this thing, I'll reform. That's a promise."

"*Ha!*" It was a snort of unadulterated skepticism and only Cassidy can give it quite that inflection.

In the subway, going downtown, I kept seeing the picture of Claire McIver's accident. Something about it kept tantalizing my memory and the harder I groped the further it receded.

Benedict Milo was not in his office and the door was locked. So I decided to see Arnold Parish instead.

The words *Investment Consultant* were printed in discreet letters on the frosted glass. The small reception room was unattended. Parish was visible through an open door, dialing a number on his telephone. He finished dialing and looked up. When he saw me he replaced the handset and called, "How do you do, sir. Come in." His forehead wrinkled as I approached. "Say, you're Scott Jordan, the attorney. I remember. We met up in Riverdale."

"That's right."

He did not offer his hand. "Did—er—Vincent send you?"

"Vincent doesn't know I'm here."

He hiked up his sleeve and glanced at his watch. "I can't give you much time. Is there something you want?"

I smiled. "Well, for one thing, I want you to understand that I don't represent Vincent, that I'm not his lawyer, and haven't been for years. I came here on an entirely different matter. Amy Van Dorn told me you give advice on investments."

"That's true."

"She says you're good at it."

"I like to think so. She took my advice and more than doubled her capital."

"So I understand. I'm coming into some money fairly soon and I thought I'd talk to you about it."

His manner changed; he was instantly warm and affable. He forgot his haste and almost purred. "Well, sir, you came to the right place. Of course I'd have to know the amount of your capital and your investment goal."

"Goal?"

"Current income or future appreciation."

"Is there a difference?"

"Generally speaking, yes. Growing companies put most of their money into research and expansion instead of paying it out in dividends."

I said, "The amount of capital would depend on a case I'm handling. About fifty thousand dollars, I imagine."

He smiled heartily. "A nice round sum, and you should start investing it as soon as possible. At your age you can afford to take a chance. These are dynamic times, Mr. Jordan. Research is constantly developing new products, consumer demand is rising, bank deposits are increasing, our economy is expanding, the population is growing, automa-

tion is taking over, and there is only one direction for equity values . . . *up*."

Apparently he had never heard of Isaac Newton and the celebrated apple. He was a glib and practiced pitchman, quoting statistics, and I could not help wondering why the experts who speak so knowledgeably seldom have the resources to take their own advice.

"I'm practically sold, Mr. Parish. Would you write down one or two companies that you have in mind? I'd like to check on them."

"Certainly." He reached for a pencil. "I'm not going to suggest a portfolio at this time. That requires research, investigation, analysis, imagination. But I will name several companies with enormous prospects. Over the long term you can't help but improve your financial position by investing in the future of American industry."

I could see the members of the New York Stock Exchange genuflecting in his direction.

He finished writing, folded the sheet of paper, and slid it into an envelope. He handed it to me and said, "Just remember one thing. You can't buy a stock and forget it. Investments need constant supervision."

I stood up. "This has been a most enlightening visit, Mr. Parish. I appreciate your advice."

He rose and offered me his hand. "Then I'll hear from you soon?"

"Oh, yes," I promised, "you'll hear from me."

He convoyed me out to the elevator, giving me the full treatment, respect and a touch of reverence. Luckily, he was unable to read my mind or he might have been tempted to send me down the elevator shaft before the car arrived.

When I reached the street I took out the envelope and inspected his handwriting. I compared it with the letter that

Amy Lee Dare had interrupted Inez Lenox Howard. One look was enough. A good attorney had been ready to disguise the shrewd, hard-bitten woman, but to a practised eye certain characteristics were unmistakable. Arnold Frank had written both documents.

On my way uptown I stopped off at Hernando West. John West was buried deep in a morass of paper work. The lines in his face were deeper, the strain more evident. He extended an unfriendly "I assume you're in trouble."

"I'm out on bail, you know that."

"I know it," he said. "We can pick you up on another charge, however, easily and swiftly."

"I've never known that was self-defense."

He shuffled some papers on his desk and opened them wearily. "Why didn't you tell us Bessie was mixed up in a counterfeiting racket? That opens a lot of new doors."

"I thought you knew."

"You told Kilbourne, not us."

"John, I talked you in circles as best I knew how. Bessie's identity was established and I learned the connection between them."

"Not even enough. You knew where you got those bills from Bessie's sister. And you knew where she got them from her brother. That's where you should have talked. We've got to get him in a murder case. Whatever got away, names and addresses disappeared." His pencil, his eyes probing straight at me. "Is there anything else I ought to know about Bessie?"

I said quietly, "I think you should ask Nicholas Bessie that question."

"What do you mean?"

I told him about the phone calls between them, about the lawyer's quick visit to Bessie's. Mid the instant I had left the office. I told him how Bessie had contacted Howard,

and how the motive for killing Banton fitted him even more than me.

Nola was out of his chair, moving with a swift economy of motion, ordering me to follow. We climbed into a police car waiting at the curb and he pointed his chin at the driver.

"Give the man Strang's address."

Fifteen minutes later we walked into the lawyer's office. He gave me a frigid glare when Nola identified himself. It glanced off. The legal profession is not a fraternity club and I felt no compunctions. I didn't owe him a thing.

Nola came straight to the point. "Is it true, counselor, that you spoke to Steve Banton shortly before he was murdered?"

"Well, lieutenant, suppose you tell me what this is all—"

"I asked a question. Answer it, please."

Strang had himself under control now and he moved his shoulders suavely. "It would be pointless to deny it."

"Was the deceased a client of yours?"

"Hardly."

"Then it would be equally pointless to claim privileged communication. What was the purpose of your call?"

"I have already explained that to Jordan."

"I'd prefer to hear it in your own words." The lieutenant's voice was brittle and businesslike.

"Certainly." Strang was being smoothly co-operative. "I knew that the district attorney was investigating the McIver divorce. I knew also that Banton had been questioned. As attorney of record for one of the litigants I was naturally interested in his testimony. I called to suggest that he tell the truth."

"Which was?"

"That it was a bona fide raid and not collusive."

"Then you believe Claire McIver was having an affair with her chauffeur."

"I—didn't say that, lieutenant."

"Can you offer some other explanation for her presence in that hotel room?"

"I'm afraid not."

"You were a close friend of hers. You must have discussed the incident."

"On the contrary. It would have been embarrassing."

"Embarrassing?" A caustic bite to Nola's voice, his eyes cold. "She was served with papers, stating a cause of action. She came to you as her lawyer and showed you the complaint. You were also her boy friend. That's common knowledge. Are you asking me to believe that you accepted the facts as stated without question? That you exhibited no jealousy?" He exhaled sharply. "At any rate you're on safe ground there. Both parties are dead and unable to contradict you."

Strang stood mute, no expression on his face.

"I understand you were with her the night she died."

"We had dinner together. She left me before the accident."

"With no explanation?"

"None."

"Isn't it possible she left you for another rendezvous with Banton?"

"Possible but not probable." Strang's ego refused to let him admit the likelihood.

"What was her attitude that night? Did she appear disturbed, worried about anything?"

"Not in the least. She was carefree and gay." A sudden thought occurred to him. "As a matter of fact I can prove it. One of those night-club photographers snapped our picture just before she left. I have it here in the office. You can judge for yourself." He rummaged in a drawer and found it.

I took a look over Nola's shoulder. Claire was practically

sitting in Strang's lap, both of them smiling toothily at the camera. I stared hard, the back of my neck prickling, remembering the odd sensation I had felt on viewing the news shot of Claire after her accident.

Nola went rigid and I sensed his excitement. His voice was sharp. "You say this picture was taken the night she was killed?"

"Yes."

"This is the same dress she was wearing?"

"I believe so. Why?"

Then I knew. It streaked through my brain and left it whirling. Claire's dress—dark velveteen studded with sequins. The same cloth Laura Banton had found in her brother's brief case. Ripped from Claire's dress as the car rocked over her.

I gaped at Nola and he nodded.

"That's right, Scott. Her death was no accident. She was probably murdered, deliberately run over. The piece of cloth you sent down proves it."

Strang said, "What piece of cloth? What are you talking about?"

Nola made the explanation and added, "Banton got that cloth from the undercarriage of the car that killed her. She may have gone to meet him after she left you. They probably had a quarrel and he struck her. She fell and didn't get up. He checked and saw that she wasn't breathing and he got panicky, so he ran his car over her to make it look like an accident."

"What about the flat tire?" I asked.

"He could have let the air out."

"And her jewels?"

"Where else did he get the money to lend Hugo Ritter?"

Nicholas Strang was breathing heavily through flared nostrils, a congealed look in his eyes. Nola swung toward the telephone and put a call through to Homicide in the Bronx.

This was really their baby, not his.

XXII

The flurry it raised uptown died quickly. With seven months intervening between the event and its revelation, with Steve Banton not available for questioning, they seemed quite willing to accept his guilt and close their books.

That tossed it right back at Nola, since Banton's murder had occurred in his jurisdiction. Apparently the Bronx authorities felt no resentment against Banton's executioner even though their prerogatives had been usurped.

As the excitement waned I managed to slip away and get back to my office for the appointment with Amy Van Dorn.

She arrived promptly, her wheel chair propelled by Irene Parish. A heavy tweed overcoat was buttoned up to her chin and a large alligator purse was clutched in her lap. I noticed the expression around her mouth, the lips tucked in, tightly compressed. Her look of resolution became more pronounced as she rolled up to the side of my desk.

I wondered what new problem could be so vital it demanded an expedition to Manhattan.

Irene Parish said, "I told Amy this would be an ordeal, but she insisted. We parked the car downstairs. I hope that's all right."

"It'll probably get tagged."

"Amy has a special permit. I left it on the windshield."

There was a kind of triumphant satisfaction in the way she carried her tall figure, severe in its tailored suit.

I looked at Amy. "Was it wise to leave home?"

She returned my look stonily. "Not only wise, but essential. I've left permanently."

"Permanently?" I was staring.

"Yes. I'm staying with Irene."

"But . . . what . . ."

"Read this." She brought an envelope out of her purse. "I think it will make everything clear. It's a report from a private detective on Vincent's behavior."

I glanced at the signature and almost dropped the sheet of paper. I had a job keeping my face organized. It had been signed by Benedict Milo. Before making any comment I read the brief report, dated last night.

At 7:30 P.M. Vincent McIver had visited the Gracie Park Hotel, gone to the apartment of a Miss Denise Howard, and stayed there until almost one in the morning, after which he caught a train to Riverdale.

Just the bare recital, nothing else.

Well, I thought, that good-night kiss had developed, dissipating McIver's will power. Denise had more talent than I realized.

And so did Benedict Milo.

He must have spotted me there at the hotel, down on one knee with an eye to the keyhole. Keeping out of sight himself and maintaining a vigil at the same time. And why not? That was his business; he was a pro.

Had McIver fooled me too, I wondered. Was he aware that someone had followed him and was eavesdropping outside the door? Audibility had been good, I remembered, but not visibility. I had heard the timbre of his voice but I had not seen his gestures nor the expression on his face. He might

have signaled Denise, warned her that someone was listening. All that dialogue might have been a smoke screen to mislead me.

I didn't think so. Neither did I want to raise Amy's hopes unnecessarily.

"So you left Vincent," I said. "What next?"

"Divorce." Amy was grim. "I will tolerate anything but infidelity. He was there with that—that woman for more than five hours, the two of them, alone in her room . . ." The clutch slipped and her mouth twisted clumsily.

Irene Parish was trying to keep her face neutral and not succeeding. A look of exultant expectancy lurked beneath the surface.

Amy took a breath and swallowed painfully. "I want you to draw the papers, Mr. Jordan. You must start proceedings as soon as possible." She was fumbling inside her purse again. "I came prepared. I suppose you'll need this for the dates and everything."

It was a marriage certificate, dated August 10, the year they met, and signed by Mr. Wilbur Thistle, Justice of the Peace in Azusa, California. Azusa, the city with everything from A to Z, from Airedales to zircons. Read the advertisements.

How big a tip had Mr. Thistle received, I wondered, to keep the wedding ceremony under his nonclerical hat?

"Have you discussed this with Vincent?" I asked.

"What is there to discuss? I don't want to speak to him and I don't want to see him." Her chin quivered, but she immediately got it under control. "I'm leaving everything to you."

"We'll need more evidence."

Irene Parish snorted.

Amy said, "That should be easy enough to obtain."

"I'm not so sure," I said. "By leaving Vincent you've given him notice of your intention to sue. He'll probably be very discreet from now on."

She caught her bottom lip between her teeth. They left white marks. "What do you suggest?"

"Go home," I said. "Play innocent. Don't let him know that you suspect anything and we'll keep an eye on him."

My own eye, at the moment, was on Irene Parish, trying to assess her reaction. She chilled instantly at the suggestion.

"Absolutely not." Amy was emphatic. "I couldn't stay in the same house with him, or eat at the same table, or look at his face and know that he was thinking of another woman. There must be some other way."

"You could sue for a legal separation."

Irene Parish horned in. "A separation? But he'd still be her husband."

"That's right."

"Wouldn't he be entitled to part of her estate?"

So that's what's eating you, is it, lady? Amy's money. All that wonderful loot, solidly invested in real estate and blue chip securities. The prospect of seeing it pass out of the family into Vincent McIver's pocket was eating her alive. And eating her husband, too.

"That would depend on the separation agreement," I said.

"Amy," Irene snapped, "get rid of him. Completely and finally."

Amy agreed. "That's the only way. I've made up my mind."

I spread my hands. "You realize that I'm tied up on other matters. Can I have a day or two to think about it?"

Irene started a protest, but Amy stopped her.

"That will be satisfactory, Mr. Jordan. You can reach me at the Parish apartment."

We said good-by. Irene got behind the wheel chair and

steered it through the door. I walked to the window and looked out over the city. The Third Avenue El had always been an eyesore. Now for some reason I missed it. Below me were rooftops without symmetry, a crazy patchwork of TV antennas, an occasional penthouse with boxed hedges and transplanted saplings. The streets crawled with human insects and four-wheeled bugs honking at each other, jockeying for position.

Irene Parish had done a good job. With the help of her husband she had poisoned Amy's mind. Vincent McIver was in the doghouse, and I wondered how they had pushed Denise into his life.

I turned back to the desk and saw Amy's marriage certificate. My thoughts bridged a two-year gap, conjuring a mental picture of Vincent McIver, handsome and debonair, behind the wheel of a car, with Amy Van Dorn at his side, a radiant Amy directing him to Azusa, California, and a Justice of the Peace who would keep their secret.

I brought out the papers on McIver's divorce from Claire and read them through with a probing eye from the complaint to the interlocutory decree granted early in May. The papers were in order, but something else disturbed me.

I shuffled through the papers again and saw Benedict Milo's report. So the Parish family knew Milo after all. Was that how Arnold Parish got the picture Milo took of the divorce raid?

I reached for the telephone and dialed Milo's number. When I heard his voice I broke the connection and got out of the office fast.

XXIII

Benedict Milo was sitting behind his desk when I walked through the door. A faint glimmer of apprehension touched his eyes and he half rose out of his chair. But there was nothing warlike in my manner and he saw the amiable smile on my face.

"Relax," I told him. "Glad I found you in. I promised Amy Van Dorn I'd come by to see you."

It took a moment to register. Then he sat up straight. "Amy Van Dorn?"

"Mrs. Vincent McIver, our client." I sat down and crossed my knees, crisp and businesslike. "Don't you remember? You gave her a report this morning on her husband. She wants to divorce him and we've got a lot of work to do. First we've got to line up—"

"Hold on." His eyes were stretched wide with incredulity. "You're not her lawyer?"

"Didn't she tell you? Well, I guess she was upset." I paused. "You look skeptical, Milo, and in a way I don't blame you. Seems odd, doesn't it? Two years ago I appeared *for* the husband and now I'm appearing *against* him. Times change, don't they? Look at yourself. You spied on his wife two years ago and now you're spying on him."

He was shaking his head, mouth open.

"You're still doubtful?" I reached into my pocket. "Here's the report you submitted. She was in my office a little while ago and gave it to me."

He glanced at it uncertainly.

"All right," I said, waving at the telephone. "Call her and check. She's staying with the people who recommended you, her niece, Mrs. Irene Parish. Go ahead. I'll wait."

He reached for the handset and dialed. He spoke to Irene Parish and listened briefly. Then he hung up and dipped his chin.

"First," I said, "I want to congratulate you. Your performance in shadowing McIver last night was very capable, extremely so. You saw me doing the same thing and managed to keep out of sight. I had no inkling you were on the job."

He acknowledged the compliment with another dip of his chin.

I said, "Well, here we are again, Milo. Working together on another divorce case. Only this time I want it clearly understood, everything has to be on the level. I don't want it backing up to haunt me two years from now. You'll have to catch McIver with the goods or not at all. Absolutely no collusion. I don't care how long it takes." I smiled meaningfully. "Nor should you, I imagine. After all, you get paid by the day. But if it works out soon, you can expect a bonus."

"Good enough."

"Have you any idea what happened in the Gracie Park last night during McIver's visit?"

Milo looked down his nose. "I waited for him in the lobby."

"It would have been a good chance to eavesdrop."

He shook his head. "Not with you in the picture. I didn't know where you fitted and I couldn't take the chance. I was afraid you might return."

"And he went straight home after that?"

"Just like it says in the report."

I lighted a cigarette and puffed thoughtfully. "Mrs. McIver tells me you were recommended by Arnold Parish."

"That's right."

"Best damned investment adviser in town. I'm doing business with him myself."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Didn't know young lawyers made enough money to invest."

"They don't. I inherited it from an uncle in Des Moines."

"Best way to make it."

"I agree. How did you meet Parish?"

"Through Strang. Parish wanted a—" He caught himself, realizing his error.

It was the opening I wanted. I stood over him, gripping the edge of his desk. "So you did know Strang after all. You knew him well enough to get a recommendation. It was Strang who sent you over to McIver two years ago and arranged the whole setup, wasn't it?"

Benedict Milo had fumbled the ball and he knew it. He stared at me in sullen-faced deliberation.

"All of a sudden you're tongue-tied," I said. "Okay, Milo, try to sit on it and see how long you last. Just remember, you told the district attorney you didn't know Strang and he has your sworn statement. You held out on him, obstructing justice. I wouldn't give you a plugged nickel for your license now."

Nothing came out of him. Not a word.

"Strang might have been involved in the Banton killing, but you held your tongue. Suppressing evidence helpful to the solution of a homicide. And you're still holding it. Don't think the boys on Centre Street can't shake you loose. They're experts."

He sat there, hating me with his eyes.

"Where did Parish get that picture you took of the divorce raid? Did you sell it to him? No matter, Milo. We'll find out." I saluted coldly. "I have what I want. You're no use to me now."

I turned and started for the door. I thought he'd call me, try to compromise, switch his story. I was wrong. He let me go. Not that I cared especially. Nola could handle his kind better than I.

I was certain now that Lohman was right. The McIver divorce was collusive, only he was blaming the wrong man. Nicholas Strang should have been his target.

How far would the lawyer go to protect himself? Would he eliminate Banton? I remembered the strained look in his eyes when we discovered the truth about Claire's death. And thinking of Claire, I remembered asking him about her estate. I groped in my memory and it came back readily enough. The estate had been inherited by Claire's aunt, a woman named Theresa Gould.

She was listed in the Manhattan directory, an address on East 74th. I phoned first and got permission to visit her. The building had once been a private residence, now converted into small apartments.

She must have been waiting at the door because it opened the moment I touched the bell. She was very small, with delicate bone structure and milk-blue veins in a serene face. With the white hair atop her head and the lace collar around her neck she looked like a portrait of someone's ancestor.

She smiled and held the door wide. "You're Mr. Jordan. Come in, please. Come right in."

The moment I crossed the threshold a pocket-sized terrier started yapping and scampering frantically around my feet.

She admonished him gently. "Quiet, Leo. Leave the man alone and behave yourself. Down, I say."

Leo subsided, all except his tail which kept functioning as a carpet beater. Except that no dust floated up from the spotless carpet.

"He's so little compared to other dogs," she said. "That's why I call him Leo, the name they give lions. It's good for him psychologically, otherwise he might get an inferiority complex."

I gave her a quick sharp look to see if she was pulling my leg, but no, she was dead serious.

"I prepared some tea, Mr. Jordan. Do you drink tea?"

"Like an Englishman."

It raised me several notches in her estimation. The tea service was already laid out, antique sterling, wrought by an underpriced silversmith. The furnishings in her living room went back two generations. I sat politely in a formal straight-backed needlepoint chair, and watched her pour.

"Sugar?"

"One lump."

"Milk or lemon?"

"Lemon."

We sat and sipped in silence. After a while Mrs. Gould put her cup down and regarded me tranquilly.

"You said you wanted to talk about my niece. Were you a friend of Claire's?"

"I knew her husband."

"Vincent?" She smiled fondly. "Such a dear man, and so distinguished-looking. I have autographed copies of all his books. So talented. Claire made a big mistake. She never should have divorced him."

"Did she discuss it with you?"

"She seldom discussed anything with me. Not even as a child. I brought her up, you know."

"I didn't know."

"Her father and mother died when she was nine. Oh, my, what readjustments we had to make. She was a headstrong little girl, totally undisciplined. I simply could not cope with her. And as soon as she was old enough she took an apartment of her own."

She reached for a cookie, broke off a molecule, and permitted Leo to lick it off her finger. His tail went crazy with ecstasy.

"Don't be a glutton, Leo," she chided him affectionately. "He forgets he has a small stomach. Will you have a cookie, Mr. Jordan?"

I took one and munched. "Delicious."

"Baked them myself."

A moment went by. Sitting in that high-ceilinged room, insulated from the street noises, sipping tea, I felt like a scene in a Victorian play.

"Have you seen the papers?" I asked.

"Oh, yes."

"Then you know the latest theory."

"About Claire's death?" She shook her head tolerantly. "Those newspapers! They'll print anything to increase circulation."

"Not this time, Mrs. Gould. The conclusion was not theirs. They got it from the police."

"Perhaps." She accepted the statement with equanimity. "I just can't seem to feel any emotion, though. I cried when Claire died seven months ago. There was nothing I could do about it then and I can't do anything about it now."

"Yes, you can, Mrs. Gould."

She looked at me calmly, one eyebrow slightly elevated.

"This whole case is obscured by vagueness and doubt," I said. "If we could find out why she drove up to the Bronx that night, where she was headed. If we could—"

Veined hands fluttered helplessly. "But why come to me? I haven't the faintest notion."

"Let me put it this way, Mrs. Gould. You were the sole legatee of Claire's estate. All her possessions, her papers, everything, must have been turned over to you."

"Yes, they were." She seemed faintly puzzled. "I went through Claire's apartment with her lawyer, Nicholas Strang. We gave her clothes to charity and sold the furniture. I kept only some letters and pictures and intimate mementoes."

"You saved them?"

"Yes, I did."

"May I have a look?"

She looked dubious and then shrugged. "If you like. I don't suppose it could harm anyone."

She went into the adjoining room, with Leo frisking joyfully at her heels. He was the happiest dog I ever saw. Looking for an ash tray and finding none I decided not to smoke. Mrs. Gould joined me carrying a shoebox tied with a ribbon. She placed it alongside the tea service and removed the lid. A mélange of papers, envelopes and old snapshots came into view.

My hostess placidly continued to sip tea while I combed through the contents. Many of the letters were girlhood keepsakes and I passed them by. There were some bank statements and insurance receipts. I found a certified copy of her divorce decree from Vincent McIver. The snapshots showed her at various ages in various poses with various males. One of the males was a resplendently attired cowboy and the picture had been snapped in front of Harold's Club

in Las Vegas. In another she was standing at the corner of Hollywood and Vine with a towering specimen wearing an implausible sports shirt and a vacuous smile.

According to the last census there are more women in the world than men, but Claire had never suffered any shortage. There was a kind of tantalizing sensuality about her that magnetized them, pulled them to her.

"I see that Claire spent some time on the west coast," I said. "When was this?"

"Right after the divorce trial. Vincent was there doing a scenario. I don't know why she went. She hated California. If she—" Mrs. Gould paused and looked at me curiously. "Is something wrong?"

I took a pair of long gaudy earrings out of the shoebox. "Are these diamonds?"

"Yes. Three carats apiece. Pretty, aren't they?"

"They must be valuable. Why don't you keep them in a safe deposit box?"

She shook her head firmly. "Oh, no. I couldn't consider it. Just think of all the lovely things locked away in bank vaults, with nobody able to enjoy them."

She had a point there, I had to admit. "But what if they're stolen?"

The prospect failed to distress her. "Then some poor thief would have the money," she said, "and the insurance company would reimburse me. Nobody loses."

"Nobody but the insurance company."

"Pooh!" She dismissed it as inconsequential. "They have plenty of money."

And not only ingenuous old ladies have that line of reasoning, I thought. I gathered up the snapshots and paused again to stare at the one of Claire on Hollywood and Vine. After a moment I roused myself.

"May I borrow this, Mrs. Gould?"

She looked doubtful. "Well . . ."

"I promise to return it. We can have another chat and some more tea."

That sold her. "Then take it. And come again soon."

I stood up and she took me to the door. Leo yapped ineffectually at my heels. When I got to the street it was growing dark. Another day had petered out. I was sharply aware of the passing time.

I thought of Hugo Ritter. About him I wasn't worried. Uncle Sam had him under control, digging into his past, examining his present, and arranging for his future.

What worried me was his associates. It kept me away from home and I wound up at Hazel's instead.

No greeting from her until she had poured me a drink.

"Scotch," she said. "Twelve years old. Recommended for frayed nerves. Maybe it will help."

"I'd need the whole bottle."

"Stop boasting. The whole bottle would put you to sleep."

"Is that bad?"

"For you, yes. You can't afford to rest. You have work to do."

"A mind-reader. Only tonight we combine work and relaxation. There's a night spot I've got to visit and I need company. You're elected."

She was pleased. "I'll wear my new dress. And I think you ought to shave. Your beard is showing. I'll lend you a razor."

"Razor?" I pulled my chin in and looked at her. "Who else uses—"

"No innuendoes, please. The razor is mine. And stop peering to see if I have a mustache. It's for my legs."

"Legs?"

"Yes. Girls have them you know, and sometimes they get a little fuzzy and—"

"Cut it out. You're ruining my illusions."

When I came out of the bathroom, Hazel pirouetted in a shimmering dress of silk organdy. I stood very still and admired my girl with the dark hair and the Oriental eyes and the warm glowing olive skin.

"Hey!" She snapped her fingers. "You're off in the wild blue yonder again. Come back to earth. Would you care to unburden yourself, Scott? I have a lovely bosom for a confession. Or haven't you noticed?"

"How could I help noticing?"

She colored faintly. "At least there's hope. Come along."

XXIV

In the taxi I settled back, trying to get organized. Each idea was a pebble that started a fresh avalanche.

I had the solution—almost.

If only my brain would function with the implacable logic of Univac, if only I could feed it the necessary data and wait for the circuits to pop out an answer.

Univac must tip the scales at over a ton. In contrast the gray mechanism in a man's head weighs only fifty ounces. While it lacks the speed it is decidedly more versatile, with its ability to store and record a million impressions. The big hurdle was my inability to search the files and collate the data. To sort and winnow and balance the results.

Hazel, sensing my preoccupation, sat quietly, avoiding any intrusion.

The taxi pulled up on Grove Street before a flickering neon sign that said: *Club Maracas.* A doorman broke the good news. We were just in time, the floor show hadn't started. Inside, a captain of waiters led us to a table.

Once settled, we looked the place over. The area was limited, the decor garish. A tinsel and papier-mâché effect. On the bandstand five diminutive Latins were playing mambo music. Lack of space on the dance floor precluded

any freewheeling antics, but the patrons were getting a workout nonetheless.

I blinked as Hazel snapped her fingers under my face again. "Wake up. Am I getting through to you, Scott?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then relax. There's music and a few more inches on the floor." She stood up and wriggled her fingers.

We elbowed our way through and I got an arm around her. Hazel at a typewriter, with Mr. Gregg's hieroglyphics in front of her eyes, was brisk, impersonal, and efficient. Hazel on a dance floor, with Señor Motonya's music in her ears, was something else, animated, graceful, and inspired.

"Well," she said, "you're improving, Scott."

"Naturally. I've been taking lessons."

"Where?"

"The Andrew Norton Studios."

"They've done a good job."

We finished the dance and stayed on the floor for one more. This was a fast rhumba and it left us warm and breathless.

"Back to the table," I said firmly. "We can't dance like this without nourishment."

But we did not reach our destination. There was a roadblock at the edge of the dance floor. Denise Howard stood in our path, fists on her hips and a murderous blue glare in her eyes. A Graflex camera with photoflash attachment hung around her neck. The salient features of her anatomy were sharply accentuated in a highly abbreviated costume.

She said in a voice gritty with anger, "You learn fast, don't you, Mr. Astaire?"

Already a few people, sensing the tempest, had turned to look at us. Hazel lost her smile and stood beside me uncertainly.

"What's the gag?" Denise said, not trying to keep her voice down.

"Gag?"

"The dancing lessons. Who do you think you're kidding? I saw you on the dance floor just now."

"Denise," I said placatingly, "listen—"

"No. You listen. I don't like anybody making a fool of me. You came to the studio for a reason. I want to know what it is."

"Simmer down," I said. "You're liable to lose your job, making a scene with the customers."

"What do I care?" Biting sarcasm in her voice. "You'll get me a new job in television, won't you? You'll make me famous. In a pig's neck, Mr. Jordan. You don't know anybody in television. You're a lawyer. I thought there was something familiar about you, and I checked your picture in one of the papers after you left."

"What's the trouble here?" A new voice had intruded. It was the captain of waiters.

"Nothing," I told him. "Everything is fine. Miss Howard is an old friend of mine."

"Like hell," she said bitterly, her anger feeding itself, growing more intense.

The captain gave her a frozen look. "Leave the floor, Miss Howard."

"Try and make me."

"Easy does it," I said soothingly. "Let's not start a Donnybrook here. You want an explanation, Denise, and you're entitled to one. Let's go someplace where we can talk."

She turned, carrying herself stiffly, jaw tight.

I squeezed Hazel's arm reassuringly. "Be with you in a moment. Go back to the table."

No demurrer from my girl. She simply turned and marched.

I went after Denise, back past the cloakroom, along a narrow hall and through a door down a flight of stairs to the basement. She was like a cat with its claws showing. I followed her into a small room where a thin youth was working at a bench over photographic paraphernalia and developing solutions. Negatives were drying on a line and floating in white enamel trays. He raised his voice complainingly.

"You're not supposed to bring anybody in here, Denise. It's—"

She cut him short with a peremptory gesture. "Outside, Irving. You need some air."

"But I gotta finish that last batch. The boss will—"

"You heard me," she snarled at him. "Bail out."

"Look, sonny," I told him, "this won't take long. The floor show is about to begin and none of the customers are going to leave. You'll be able to get those prints upstairs in plenty of time." I helped him decide with a five-dollar bill.

When he was gone, Denise faced me, her eyes smoldering. "All right, I'm listening. What brought you to the studio?"

"I wanted to meet you, Denise. I wanted to look you over and size you up."

"What for?"

"I was curious to know what kind of a girl could be hired to catch a man's eye and involve him unwillingly in a romance. Not because she liked him, but for money, so his wife could be tipped off and misled into believing him unfaithful."

It caught her by surprise and she moved back a step.

"I—what are you talking about?"

"You," I said. "You and Vincent McIver."

She just stared at me, her lips parted, a little bewildered by our sudden change in positions.

"You know the man," I said. "He's been to your apartment several times. I followed him there myself last night, and so did a private detective hired by his wife. I have his report right here in my pocket and we know how long McIver stayed."

She pulled herself up defiantly. "So what? What if he did visit me? His wife is an invalid. You can't expect a man—"

"Please." I cut her short. "This was not a legitimate romance. You don't care for McIver. You probably don't even like him. You made a deliberate and calculating pitch for the man and it was easy. He's past his prime and it pleased his ego. But it didn't mean a thing, especially to you. Because you were hired for the performance."

Her throat was flushed, a pulse throbbing under the skin. The question was in her eyes but not on her tongue.

I answered it. "You were hired by Arnold Parish."

She found her voice and tried to brazen it out. "I never heard of him."

"It's no use, Denise. If you keep lying you'll only get yourself in deeper. We have all the facts. We know that Parish met you in a bar the other day. I was there myself and I saw you. What's more, I have a letter in my pocket written to McIver in Parish's handwriting, but signed with your name. The letter was intercepted by McIver's wife, exactly as Parish planned. It was deliberately mailed to reach the house at a time he knew McIver was going to be out of town."

"I—I don't believe it."

I took the letter out and handed it to her. She scanned the words quickly and I detected a curious flicker in her

eyes. I figured the letter would be confetti in about one second, so I snatched it back.

"Excuse me. I don't mean to be rude, but we may need this for evidence."

Her shoulders slumped and her mouth was sour with the taste of defeat. She shrugged resignedly.

"Listen to me, Denise," I said quietly. "We have nothing against you. We don't want to hurt you or get you involved. There're a lot of things here that you don't know anything about. One of them is murder." She went pale. "If you tell me the truth now, I'll try to keep you out of it. You'll get every consideration."

She thought it over, biting her lip. Then she moved her shoulders heavily and asked in a toneless voice, "What do you want to know?"

"Where you met Arnold Parish."

"At the studio. Believe it or not, he came for dancing lessons. At least that's what he said. Maybe he was looking for someone like me to do his dirty work. Anyway he gave me a couple of large tips and I was impressed. I went out with him a couple of times before he made that proposition about McIver."

"Promising you what?"

"He told me his wife would inherit a lot of money if he could break up McIver's marriage. He promised me two thousand dollars if I helped."

"And you trusted him?"

"He gave me five hundred on account."

"And how did you arrange to meet McIver?"

"Arnold did that. He said McIver was very vain and he wrote a fan letter in my name. He really laid it on, saying how much I liked McIver's books and how disappointed I was that he hadn't written anything in such a long time. He

wrote that some of the girls at the studio wanted to form a McIver fan club and couldn't I meet him sometime to discuss it. It got through all right, because two days later he showed up."

She smiled faintly. "He was surprised when he saw me. I'd made a hit, I could tell, and he wanted to take me out. After that it was easy. I just kept praising his books and how he lapped it up. He really loved to hear how good he was."

Chalk one up for Arnold Parish. His selection of a confederate was near perfect. To a once famous author on the skids, adulation and flattery from Denise Howard would be a real hypo. Until he realized where this sort of thing could lead.

He was aware of Amy's jealousy, her possessiveness, her inflexible attitude toward infidelity. And he wanted to break it off, sharp and quick.

"All right," I said. "You got five hundred dollars and you earned it. Keep it and consider yourself lucky. Parish won't try to get it back. He doesn't want any publicity. Now I'm going to give you some advice. Gratis. Stay away from McIver. Do you understand?"

She nodded.

"Okay. Go out now and take some pictures."

Hazel was waiting at the table, working industriously over a steak. "I got hungry and I ordered." She pointed her fork and swallowed. "One thing, it's never dull going out with you. Tell me about the redhead."

I knew from her expression that she couldn't be sidetracked. So I explained and saw her face go from incredulity to anger. She shook her head heatedly. "You mean Arnold Parish pulled a trick like that in order to break up a marriage, just so he could inherit some money?"

"That's right."

"How low and contemptible can a man get?"

"Depends on the amount of money involved. Pretty low, I'd say."

"But a scheme like that—why, it's positively fiendish. Did Irene know?"

"She even helped."

"They're inhuman, both of them. I never heard of anything so despicable, trying to deprive Amy of what little happiness she had left."

"How about McIver?"

"All men are alike. You can't blame Vincent. Just take a look at that redhead."

"Quite a dish."

"So you're aware of it too."

"Blind I'm not."

"You will be, my friend, even if I have to perform the operation with my own fingernails." She paused thoughtfully and frowned. "What if Arnold's scheme hadn't worked? What if Vincent refused the bait?"

I nodded. "Parish considered that too. He had other irons in the fire. Denise, I think, was only added insurance. There must have been quite a sum involved because he went to a lot of trouble to pry McIver out of the picture."

She watched me, waiting for me to continue.

"You see, it was Parish who started the whole mess. He probably suspected there was something offbeat about McIver's divorce from Claire. So he made it his business to contact Milo, and when he got a look at the detective's files and saw that snapshot of Claire and Banton, it confirmed his suspicion. I don't know whether he bought it or stole it, but the fact remains that he sent it down to the district attorney with an explanation of its significance. That's where he ran into some luck. It coincided with Lohman's crusade and they

started an investigation. And you know what happened after that."

Hazel closed her mouth.

"Does your friend know about this?"

"What friend?"

"Lieutenant Nola. Shouldn't he be informed?"

"He should indeed. Excuse me a moment."

I remembered the phone booths alongside the cloakroom. I dialed Homicide West and got Sergeant Wienick on the phone. The lieutenant, he said, was out. In a matter-of-fact voice he added, "We got another one."

"Another what?"

"Victim."

I caught my breath. "Who?"

"Benedict Milo, the private eye in that divorce case. Somebody put a bullet through his head. I think the lieutenant wants to see you." He rang off.

I stood in the booth, my head like a whirlpool, spinning with thoughts. I hung up very slowly. Hazel saw my face and stood up quickly as I approached. I gave her the news. She was silent for a moment.

"Oh, Scott, where is it going to end?"

"I have a pretty good idea," I said quietly. "I want you to take a taxi and go home. Will you do that? Go home and wait for me?"

She swallowed, staring at me hard. "Be careful, Scott."

"I'll try."

When her cab pulled away I stood back in the shadows, concentrating. So Benedict Milo was dead. The fact did not surprise me. Somebody was bound to write him off sooner or later.

He posed a threat to Arnold Parish if he talked. He posed

a bigger threat to Strang. The lawyer could never know when a man like Milo would melt under heat.

There was no help for it. Hugo Ritter's friends or not, I had to go back to my own apartment. It would be only a temporary stop. I had a gun hidden away there, a nine-millimeter Luger that I had taken from a German colonel during the war.

The case was approaching a climax and I didn't want to make any more calls without being armed.

The moment I entered the lobby, someone stood up out of the shadows and I stiffened involuntarily. Then a light struck across her face. It was Laura Banton and I breathed easier.

"Laura," I said. "What is it?"

Her eyes were veined and puffy and she was full of tension. "Can we go upstairs? I have something to show you. Something dreadful."

XXV

The contents of a small chamois bag were spread out on the table. They held my gaze, a bracelet of twisted gold, and a pair of earrings. The earrings were distinctive, hand-wrought, two large lapis lazuli studding the tips, and I recognized them instantly with a shock.

"Where did you get these, Laura?"

"I found them in the glove compartment of Steve's car." Her voice was barely audible.

"When?"

"This afternoon. I had the day off and I wanted to drive up to the country. The police had given me an envelope with Steve's belongings and the car keys were in it too. I knew where he kept it parked. It had been on the street for several days and the windshield was dirty. I looked in the glove compartment for a rag and this is what I found." Her throat worked and she whispered painfully. "They were hers, weren't they? Claire McIver's?"

"Yes," I said.

No doubt whatever in my mind. The earrings had been plainly visible in that night-club picture of Claire and Nicholas Strang. The picture taken that same night she was killed.

Laura swallowed miserably. "I read in the papers that

she'd been murdered and her jewels stolen." Tears stung her eyes. "My own brother! How could Steve do such a thing?"

"You think he's guilty of murder?"

She looked away. "He must be. Don't you see? It all adds up—the jewels, that piece of cloth from her dress, even the time she was killed."

"What about the time she was killed?"

"Thursday night. Steve's day off. So he must have had the opportunity." Her voice broke. "I'm glad Mother isn't alive. The shame alone would have killed her."

"What kind of car did Steve have?"

"A Lincoln convertible. You don't have to raise your eyebrow. It was seven years old and it only cost a couple of hundred dollars. It belonged to the McIvers. They were going to trade it in anyway, but they sold it to Steve instead."

I went to the cellarette and poured a stiff jolt of brandy and brought it back to her. "Drink this," I said. "All of it."

She poured it down and coughed.

"Now go ahead and take that ride," I told her. "Head upstate and get out of town. The change will do you good. Stay overnight in a motel somewhere."

"I have to work tomorrow."

"Forget your job. You can always find a new one. And don't worry too much about Steve. Whatever he's done I don't think he's guilty of murder."

"You're just saying that."

"No, I mean it."

After she left I allowed myself one drink. Then I put the bottle firmly away. I wanted a head that was quick and precise, and I might need the same kind of reflexes.

I took the Luger out of its hiding place. I found some shells and loaded a magazine and rammed it home. Then I

jacked a bullet into the breech, just in case. I was putting the gun under my waistband when the telephone rang.

It was Vincent McIver. "Jordan?" He sounded agitated. "Thank God you're in. I'm worried sick, man. I got back here about an hour ago and found Amy gone. It's crazy, absolutely incomprehensible. The maid said she packed a bag and left with Mrs. Parish. I phoned their apartment a dozen times, but nobody answers. Amy left no word, no note, nothing, and that's not like her at all."

"Why call me?"

"Because I searched her bedroom and found your number and address on her night table. Do you know what this is all about? Has she spoken to you?"

"Yes," I said. "Amy wants a divorce."

"*What?*" His voice went up a full octave.

"You know about her jealousy, how she feels about infidelity. She claims you've been unfaithful."

"Good Lord! Why?"

"A letter came while you were in Philadelphia. It was perfumed and Amy opened it."

The news wrung an anguished groan out of his throat. "No! Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes. Her name was Denise Howard."

"Listen, Jordan. That girl means nothing to me. Is Amy getting a divorce because of a letter?"

"Not entirely. The letter made her suspicious and she hired a private detective. Wait till you hear his name. Benedict Milo. The same bird you employed to shadow Claire. Ironic, is it not? He followed you to the Gracie Park Hotel and Amy knows how long you stayed there. When she got the report, that finished it. She called her niece and Irene Parish came and took her away."

"But I'm innocent, Jordan. I swear it."

"I know," I said. "You were framed."

"What?" His voice was incensed.

"By Arnold Parish and his wife. They cooked up that whole thing with Denise. It was Parish who wrote the letter. They know that Amy hasn't got long to live and they're trying to break up your marriage."

He took a sharp breath and said harshly, "I've got to see her. Where are they holding Amy?"

"She's incommunicado," I said. "They won't let anybody near her. Not even me and I'm her lawyer."

He could hardly believe his ears. "Amy hired you?"

"Why not?"

"Listen." He sounded desperate. "I'm coming down. I'll drive in immediately. We'll go over there together. You can get them to open the door. We'll thrash this thing out, once and for all. Tonight."

"Fine," I said. "I'll be waiting for you."

So it was coming to a boil right now. All the loose ends were funneling home. I began to perspire and I went to the window and opened it. The night sky was overcast and the air seemed charged with electricity.

I thought of Arnold Parish, gloating in his temporary triumph. I thought of Nicholas Strang and his untenable predicament. I thought of Vincent McIver racing along the Hudson in his silver-gray Bentley.

Violence breeds violence. Three dead. Claire, Banton, and Milo. The first comes hard, but the rest follow easily.

The phone rang.

"Scott?" Hazel said. "I've been worried. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

"The radio says tomorrow is going to be a nice day. I was wondering if we couldn't drive out to the country for a picnic and—"

"A *what*?"

"A picnic. You know, caterpillars and sandwiches and poison ivy."

"Maybe," I said. "If things work out. The showdown is tonight."

She took a sharp breath. "I'm coming over, Scott."

"No, Hazel. You stay where—"

But it was no use. I was talking into an empty line. I called Lieutenant Nola and spoke to him briefly. Then I invited Bill Postilie who certainly deserved a complimentary ticket for the performance.

It began to rain outside and a clap of thunder rattled the windows.

Postilie lived close by and he was the first to arrive. He shook the water from his coat, looked at me curiously, and went straight to the bar for a shot of bourbon. A few minutes later the bell rang and it was Sergeant Wienick with Arnold Parish. There was a look of austere indignation on the man's heavy face, and he began to bluster.

"Look here, Jordan, what's this all about?"

"Patience," I told him. "You'll find out."

The bell again. Nola this time, with Nicholas Strang in tow. I got a surly glare from the lawyer and herded them into the living room. Nola stiffened abruptly and headed for the table. He picked up the earrings and peered at them sharply.

"Where did you get these?"

I told him about Laura Banton's visit.

He faced Strang. "Recognize them?"

"Yes. Claire was wearing them the night she was killed." He moistened his lips. "Doesn't this explain her death?"

"Hers maybe. Not Banton's."

I heard the bell again and went to the door. Vincent Mc-

Iver had changed. Grim lines etched his worry-clouded face and the suave manner was gone. His fingers dug into my arm. "We can't delay, Jordan. Is Amy at the Parish apartment? Is that where they took her?"

"Slow down," I said. "Amy's safe. They won't hurt her. Come on in."

The company brought him up short.

Strang and Parish he knew, but the lieutenant and the assistant D.A. were strangers. I introduced them and he looked at me for an explanation.

"We found some of Claire's jewels," I said.

His startled gaze followed my finger.

"Recognize them?" Nola asked.

"Of course. The bracelet came from Cartier's and the earrings I had made in Mexico. Where did you get them?"

"They were found in Steve Banton's car."

He was silent for a moment, then he shook his head slowly. "I—I can't believe it. I knew Banton. The man was around me for years and—well, making a pitch for his employer's wife, that I can understand. But murder . . ." He shook his head again. "It hardly seems possible."

"You're right," I said. "Banton did not murder Claire."

"Then—where did he get the jewels?"

"He never had them."

"I don't understand."

"It's simple. They were planted in the car after he was killed—after it became known that Claire's death was no accident."

He gestured helplessly. "But why?"

"To mislead the police. To make it look as if Banton had run Claire down and stolen her jewels. Because now Banton was dead too and that would seal it off. There would be no point in pursuing it further."

"What happened to the rest of her jewels?" Strang had asked the question, his eyebrows beetled together.

"Held back," I said. "So we'd get the impression Banton had sold them. The man had no visible means of support, but he was living in high style. His money really came from extortion. He was blackmailing someone."

The room was silent. Rain hammered against the windows.

"Go ahead," I said. "Ask me who."

Nobody spoke. Strang ran the tip of his tongue slowly across his upper lip. Arnold Parish was breathing audibly. I looked at McIver and saw the dark pouches that had formed under his eyes, accentuating the ashen pallor of his rapidly aging face.

"It began with your divorce," I told him. "Claire wanted it, not you. And it was Strang here who told her how it could be done and who made all the arrangements. It was Strang—"

The lawyer made a strangled noise and lunged at me.

XXVI

The blow never landed. Nola caught his wrist and applied leverage. The lieutenant was lighter by twenty pounds, but Strang grimaced in pain.

"Easy, counselor. Let him finish."

I said, "All that stuff about collusion isn't important anyway. But the date of the divorce is. I got it for McIver two years ago and the interlocutory decree was signed in May. He was in California at the time and had met Amy Van Dorn. A romance blossomed and they were married. At least they went through a ceremony. Some obscure Justice of the Peace performed the ritual and signed the certificate. But he wasted his time and he wasted his ink. That certificate isn't worth the paper it's written on."

"Why?" The question was Nola's.

I looked at McIver. "Tell him."

But he had no words. He kept staring at me, his face waxen.

"All right," I said. "It takes ninety days for an interlocutory decree to become final. Until that time had elapsed he was still Claire's husband. The rule is inflexible and there are no exceptions. But he married Amy on August 10th. The ninety days had not yet passed. So his second marriage was invalid, illegal, and made him guilty of bigamy."

"Are you sure?" Nola demanded.

"I have the certificate here in my pocket."

He confronted Strang. "Did you know this?"

"I did not." The lawyer was emphatic.

"He's probably telling the truth," I said. "Only one other person knew about it."

They all looked at me, waiting.

"His first wife, Claire," I said. "She flew to California that summer after the divorce. Her aunt told me she hated California. Maybe Strang can tell us why she went."

"Money," he said woodenly. "McIver had sold his book to the films for some heavy sugar. Claire's settlement called for a cut of the proceeds. She didn't trust his figures and flew down to check directly with the producer."

"Settlement?" Nola's eyebrow was up. "As the guilty party in a divorce suit was she entitled to any settlement?"

"No," I said. "It was probably part of the deal Strang made privately with McIver."

"All right, counselor. Tie it in."

"You can almost guess the rest. Claire was out there on the scene. She knew McIver was running around with Amy Van Dorn. She probably suspected the marriage and realized it was illegal. So she made it her business to find out, recognizing the possibilities. Here was a gold mine waiting to be tapped. She had her beloved husband over a barrel. If she talked, he'd lose Amy Van Dorn and go to jail as a bigamist. So she made him pay and she continued to squeeze him even after they all came back to New York."

McIver looked numb, anesthetized by some giant needle.

"He had no choice," I said. "He kept paying until one day, inevitably, the load grew too heavy. His own money was gone, but Claire continued the pressure. There was no satisfying her, and McIver realized in growing desperation that

drastic measures would have to be taken. He took those measures when he arranged to meet her in Van Cortlandt Park."

"Wasn't that a strange meeting place?" Postilie demanded.

"Not so strange. He had warned her about Amy's jealousy. He couldn't afford to be seen in public with Claire and she played along. So he waited for her in the park and did what had to be done. I don't know the precise mechanics of the act. He probably knocked her out and then ran over her. He let the air out of her tire to simulate a flat and stripped her jewels to convey an impression of robbery."

Strang was crouching forward, staring at McIver, a single blue vein swollen across his forehead. I could still hear Parish breathing through his open mouth.

I plunged on. "He drove home to Riverdale. It was Banton's day off and he was alone in the garage. He washed the car to remove all traces of his act. And the next morning when he read the papers he thought he was safe. And after a while he began to breathe easier. But not for long. He had eliminated one threat only to create another, even more dangerous.

"Because the following day, when Banton returned and saw a washed car, he grew suspicious. He grew even more suspicious when he saw the morning papers and read about Claire. So he examined the car minutely. He rolled underneath and found a swatch of cloth from Claire's dress, snagged on the undercarriage. He recognized it from a picture in one of the tabloids."

"Sounds logical." Postilie was regarding me with fresh esteem.

"It is logical. Why else would he save a piece of incriminating evidence? Only because he himself had not committed the crime and it was material to the proof."

Both Nola and Wienick kept their eyes glued to McIver, watching him for any sudden move.

"Out of the frying pan into the fire," I said. "Now it was Banton shaking him down. Only this time it was no bigamy rap. This time it was murder. He had taken the big gamble and lost. But he knew in his heart that he would have to take it again. And his chance came when I called at Banton's hotel. Why did Banton fight to keep me out? Because he already had company. McIver was there, worried about the D.A.'s investigation. He stood to inherit a lot of money from Amy and he didn't want anything to upset the applecart. Isn't that so, McIver?"

I expected no answer and I got none. His eyes were bankrupt, staring at nothing.

"McIver had no need to worry," I said. "Banton wanted him to inherit Amy's money. The more he had, the deeper he could be tapped. When I arrived, Banton held me back until McIver could hide. He heard our conversation. He knew there were witnesses who'd testify I'd been there. He had his gun with him. The setup was perfect and he decided to strike. He did so, the moment I left, and he phoned down to the switchboard, gasping out my name. It was a perfect frame and it almost worked, especially after he planted the gun in my apartment."

"Wasn't he worried about the piece of cloth?" Postilie asked.

"Probably. But that was a calculated risk he had to take. It might never be found and if it were, who would remember what Claire had been wearing two years ago?"

"Why did he plant those jewels in the car?"

"That was an afterthought. He was trying to plug the loopholes, convince us Banton had killed Claire. But the cards were stacked against him. He did not know that Amy had

hired a private detective to follow him. Benedict Milo saw him make the plant and he must have approached McIver with a proposition. This time McIver did not wait. He'd been through the wringer twice and his nerves were frayed and jittery. So he made a quick decision. Nobody was in sight and he dropped Milo on the spot. He had obtained another gun. It may still be in his possession and you can prove—"

Perhaps I had reminded him. I don't know. But Vincent McIver did a foolish and futile thing. The gun was in his pocket and he dragged it out. How could he hope to cope with professionals like Nola and Wienick?

And maybe it wasn't so foolish after all.

Maybe his brain had painted a quick and ugly picture of himself in the dock. Maybe he dreaded the spectacle of a trial and the agonizing vigil before execution. Maybe he was hoping to stampede Nola into finishing it for him right then and there.

That would be the easy way out, and if Nola missed he could do it himself.

I saw Bill Postilie go tense, ready to leap. For a fractional instant I thought of jumping McIver myself. But neither of us moved. We didn't want to stop Nola's bullet if it came. So the lieutenant had no choice.

He fired deliberately and unhurriedly.

I saw McIver's arm fly upward, his wrist beyond repair, and his face was the tortured face of a gargoyle. Reflexive action pulled the trigger of his own gun and a bullet bit viciously into the plaster of my ceiling. At the same instant a piercing shriek filled the hallway and my bell began to ring. I went to the door and opened it.

Hazel, her face white as a sheet of paper, looked me over for bullet holes or blood, and seeing none, she threw herself into my arms.

XXVII

The sky had emptied itself during the night and today the sun was shining. Bear Mountain loomed in the background and a single cloud floated lazily across the cobalt sky. I spread a car robe over the grass while Hazel opened the picnic sandwiches.

"Chicken or tongue?" she asked.

"Chicken," I said absently.

"Mayonnaise or mustard?"

"Mayonnaise."

"Ale or coke?"

"Ale."

"Listen, loquacious, I went to a lot of trouble preparing this lunch. You can at least show some enthusiasm."

"I was thinking."

"About whom?"

"Irene and Arnold Parish. You should have seen their faces when Amy Van Dorn dictated her will in front of them last night, leaving all her money to a home for wayward girls."

"It's about time wayward girls got a break. How did she take the news about Vincent?"

"Wretchedly, of course. After all, she'd been living with the man for nearly two years. But she had already resigned herself to a divorce, so she managed to pull through."

"Did she go back to Riverdale?"

"Yes. I drove her."

Hazel handed me a paper cup and a bottle of ale.

"What will they do to Nicholas Strang?" she asked.

"They'll give him a bad time," I said. "He arranged a collusive divorce but I'm not sure they can prove it on him. The principal witnesses are dead, Claire, Banton, and Milo. McIver may talk, but that's Lohman's headache, not mine."

"And Vincent—are they going to convict him of murder?"

"They can't miss. He's already confessed."

"Then it's all wound up."

"Everything except that counterfeit business. However, they've got a pretty good lead. The syndicate sent their lawyer to represent Hugo Ritter, but he refused to see the man. Now the Secret Service is checking all the lawyer's clients and they may narrow it down."

I swallowed the last piece of chicken and licked my finger. Hazel looked at me across the blanket.

"And you, counselor, how do you feel?"

"Great."

"Can I pass you some dessert?"

"Never mind, I'll take it myself."

I reached for her and Hazel gave a scream that could be heard a full two millimeters away.